覇剣の皇姫
アルティナ
ALTINA
the Sword Princess
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ジェローム
クラリス
レジス
アルティーナ

ALTINA
the Sw ncess
"I trust you" Altina and The bibliophagic boy face difficulties together

ALTINA

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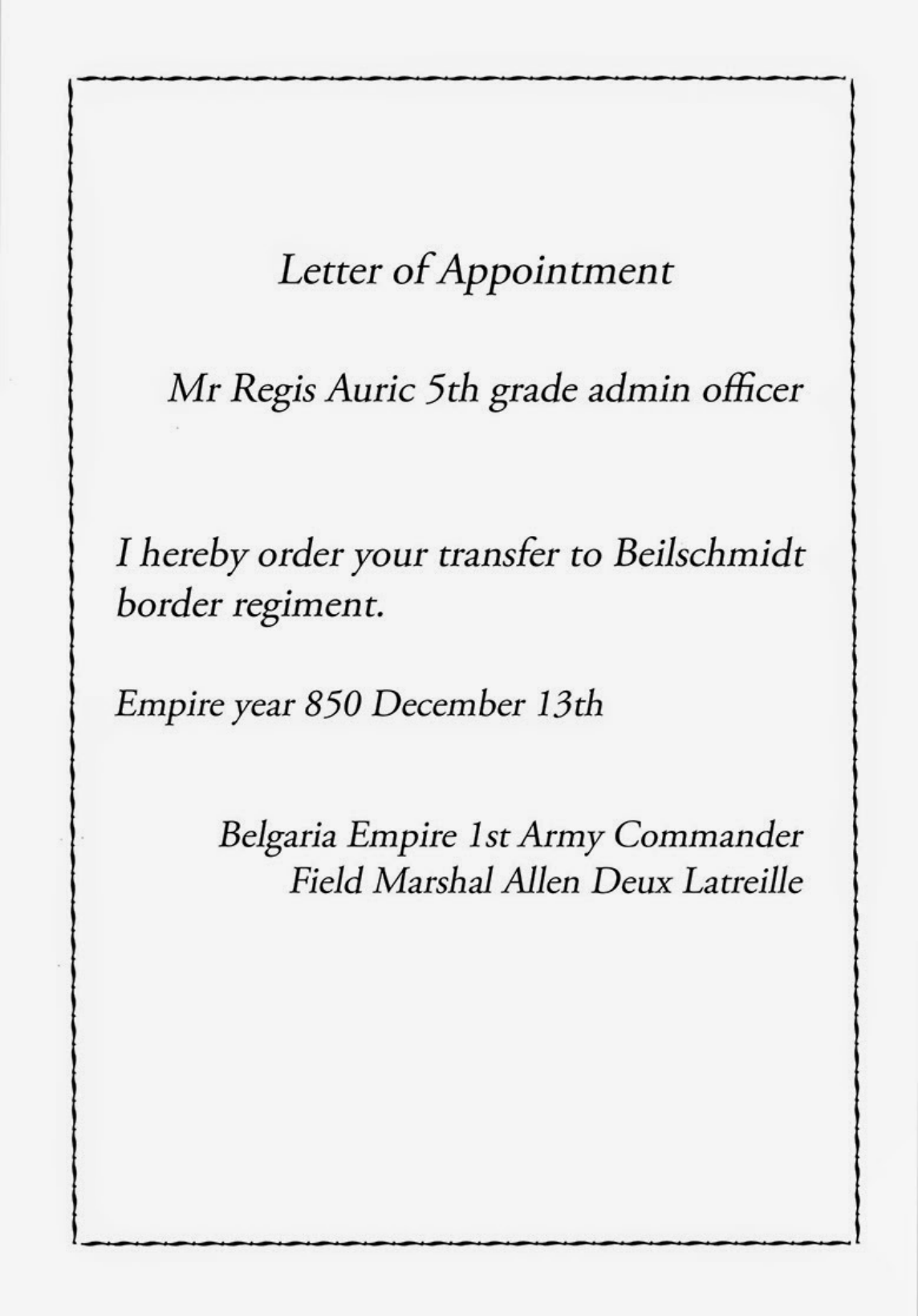
Sword Princess

Chapter 1 - The Girl with Red Hair and Crimson Eyes


Letter of Appointment
Mr Regis Auric 5th grade admin officer
I hereby order your transfer to Beilschmidt border regiment.
Empire year 850 December 13th
Belgaria Empire 1st Army Commander
Field Marshal Allen Deux Latreille

Lead colored clouds brood in the sky. The sky was like this when I received my appointment letter banishing me to the borders, Regis thought. His gaze returns to the ground, the town that is similar in

color to the sky is different from the capital. He did not miss the bricks, marbles and streetlights, but the walled streets remind him of a prison.

The border town Turnvale. 100 li (444km) away from the capital and 5 days travel by horse carriage. The streets are dim even in daylight, the freezing wind inflicts pain. The cloudy weather is normal during winter for a place in the north near the border. But it feels like a sign of his future.

Am I a failure? Regis thought. He lost his master, status and future, and was exiled to the front lines in the north.

"Well, it's not too bad... Life is not just about career advancement. In fact, this will increase my leisure reading time."

The afternoon bell was ringing in the church when the caravan arrived. The people in the convey spread out to source for lunch. Regis walks towards a shop that has nothing to do with food. The shop windows are lined up with books. Rows of bookshelves are lined inside the building constructed from stone. The smell of paper and ink lingers in the air.

"—Ah, I am free if there are books, and that place will be my home."

Quoted from Cello Romeros 'Bourgui Journals' -- he added silently in his heart.

Regis claims to be a book enthusiast, but he is actually a bibliophile.

He searched passionately in the shelf labeled new release.

His mouth widens gradually due to panic.

"What, what's happening..."

"Hmmm? What's the matter Mr. Soldier?"

The bearded shopkeeper behind the counter deep within the store asked. The scar on his face and his muscular body made him look closer to a military drill instructor instead of a bookstore clerk.

Regis continues searching despite the oppressive air.

"I can't find the new release by Cello. Or Count Ludocell. Or Professor Illusi... Are they sold out? I know they are popular, but that is too cruel."

"Mr. Soldier, did you come from central?"

"Ah, I came from the capital..."

"That's why you didn't know. The books you mentioned won't sell in this town, so most stores won't import them."

"... What, did... you say...?"

Regis sounds like a stranded man in the desert craving for water.

His throat was dry in an instance.

The storekeeper shrugged, he doesn't seem to be joking.

"This is a war zone. Heroic stories and erotic novels are what sell here. Ah, this one is the bestseller in my shop."

He pointed at the title 'How to write your will without regrets'.

No way!! Regis hugs his head as he thought.

"Wait, wait a minute... There are no stocks of those famous authors? Am I really still in Bulgaria? Did I stumble into a barbarian settlement?"

"Well, this was the neighboring nation's territory 50 years ago."

"Uguu... And what is with this price? It's 10 times that of the capital..."

He finally found a book he wants, but Regis looks like he is about to cry when he reached for it.

The bearded storekeeper says casually:

"Well, books are heavy and bandits are roaming around recently. It takes lots of effort to transport it here, and the customer base is small... near the borders, books are a luxurious hobby for the upper class."

"Why is this happening!?"

"Sorry about that..."

The shopkeeper reaches for the book Regis is holding.

Regis hugs the book in a panic.

"Wait, wait wait, I didn't say I'm not buying...!!"

"Eh? Are you serious? You look like a young soldier. It's strange for me as the seller but... pardon me, wouldn't that cost you a week of your wages?"

"Uguu... This is hell..."

Regis moans.

At this moment, the storekeeper let out a weird sound "Oh!?" and stares with his eyes wide open.

Regis follows his gaze and turns around.

At the entrance of the shop is a young girl with her back to the light.

A pretty young girl with red hair that looks as if it is burning and ruby colored eyes. She is around 13-14 years old. Her features are still a bit childlike, but she has a charm that holds your gaze, making you unable to avert your eyes.

Her erect index finger is touching her lips.

-- Be quiet? Why? What does she mean?

Other customers patronizing the bookshop are nothing special. But

Regis was strangely unnerved.

The young girl brings her hand down and opens her pink lips.

"There are many recruits lamenting about the hellish conditions of a war zone after being dispatched to the front lines, but I think you are the first to do so in a bookstore."

Her voice feels as cooling as a breeze.

The young girl smiles cheerfully.

"We finally meet! You are Regis Alric, 5th grade admin officer right?"

"Eh? Oh, me?"

"Am I wrong!?"

"No, you are right! I am Regis..."

"Great~. I was wondering what to do if I got the wrong person."

Her smile of relief has an innocence befitting her age.

Regis cheeks became warm.

Because the girl before him is very pretty-- no. That's not it. He is just feeling embarrassed and ashamed when a girl who is obviously younger than him addressed him by his name.

"Err, name… How did you know about me?"

"It is obvious to remember the name of the person you are picking up. Please don't look down on me just because I am a child."

"No no, that's not what I think... I see, you are here to pick me up."

Regis looks at the girl again.

She is wearing leather pants and boots under her brown cloak. A common attire for carriage drivers.

"You came from the fortress to pick me up, that means you are a soldier?"

"Ara, do I look like one?"

"No... That's impossible, you are underage?"

"Yes, I just turned 14."

In Bulgaria, you are an adult when you turn 15. Excluding extreme cases, underage children cannot enlist in the military.

"I see, you must be a temporary driver... I was planning to take the public stagecoach there. But to send someone to pick me up, what a privilege."

"... Are you happy?"

"... I feel a bit moody being rushed to work."

"Fufu, you are really honest."

"I don't like to lie."

"Is that so? But you are -- a tactician right?"

The girl looks at him with her crimson eyes.

Regis feels pressured to speak by the girl 4 years his junior.

"... Well, there are some who say that... I was a librarian in the military library."

"You say some interesting things. Let's continue on the wagon."

"Okay..."

Regis feels that it is hard to breath and massages his temples.

The girl walks out as she hurries him.

"Come on, let's go. The clouds are getting thicker, it's probably going to snow."

"That's right... Ah, I forgot!"

Regis was heading out but then remembered something and walks back towards the shopkeeper and puts money for the book at the counter.

"I will buy this book... Hmm? What's wrong shopkeep? You look ill?"

"No, it's nothing. Thank you for your patronage, Mr. Soldier."

The bearded shopkeeper covers his mouth with his hand and lowers his head for some reason. He seems to be enduring something.

The girl approaches Regis with a sour expression.

"Are you an idiot!?"

"What, so sudden...?"

"Books are a luxurious hobby at the borders. Only rich people and morons will spend so much money."

"Well, I don't think I am a smart man... The thirst for knowledge is the pride of mankind, giving in to this desire and reading is my way of life. No matter the obstacles or the lack of funds, telling me to give up reading is the same as telling me to give up on life."

Regis shuts his mouth after finishing, feeling embarrassed for being

so serious with a child.

The girl has an unexpectedly serious expression.

She nods.

"The same as giving up on life... Is that so, then I can understand. Me too..."

"Me too...?"

"Nothing! Let's go!"

"Ah, alright."

Regis puts the book under his armpit, dragging his luggage out of the store as he is chasing the girl.

A small wagon pulled by a single horse was parked before the shop.

A thin brown horse gazes this way.

The girl easily jumps up to the driver seat which is at the horse's waist level.

"Hey, hurry up!"

"Yeah... By the way, what's your name?"

Regis looks up at the girl and asks.

Her eyes turn sharp and she speaks with a low tone slowly, syllable by syllable.

"I am leaving you behind."

Regis scrambles up the driver seat.

That wasn't a good time to ask.

Taratara... The wooden wheels creak as it turns on the road. They are moving towards the north gate that is enclosed in stone walls. The most forward position known as Century Fortress.

A girl holding a rein is sitting on the driver seat. To her right is Regis and his luggage. Behind them are timber and bricks covered by a cloth.

"-- So, what about my name?"

"Well, how should I address you?"

"That's right..."

The girl holds her well formed jaw with her leather gloved hand and thinks.

Is this something you need to think about? Regis was baffled.

The girl relaxes her tensed lips.

"Yeah, you can call me Altina."

"Is that an alias?"

He asked without thinking too much about it, but that was a mistake. The girl named Altina frowned.

"... How rude... Isn't this a wonderful name? I was considering giving you the privilege to use it, should I take that back?"

"Sorry, please let me address you as Altina."

"Mah, I will allow it if you really want to."

"I really do."

"Fu~... You are not like a soldier at all."

"Haha, I feel the same."

Regis smiled bitterly, and so did Altina.

There are vast fields of wheat on either side of them. The seedlings are growing despite it being winter. The world is colored in the palette of the grey sky and the brown earth.

"Nah, you didn't come here voluntarily right?"

"My goal since joining the military is to be a librarian. To be honest, I enlisted because of financial issues... By the way, is there a library in Century fortress?"

"I think your room will be known as one someday."

"Ah, is there no god?"

"... Are you making puns with paper(kami) and god(kami)? Boring."

"I –I, I wasn't making puns."

"What did you do in your last unit?"

"Why? Are you questioning about my existence as a soldier?"

"That's not it, I am asking how did you draw the short straw and got posted to the front lines?"

"I think it is my punishment for losing a battle."

"And you accepted that? You are just a young non-commissioned officer. You don't even have any command authority, isn't it strange for you to take responsibility?"

Regis gazes into the distance.

The field is full of rows of wheat. He can see the undulating mountain range over the horizon.

"... Is a good man."

"Who?"

"My previous employer. I was terrible in swordsmanship and horsemanship, the last place in military academy. The one who employed me is Marquis Tennessee."

"Last place? But I heard you have never lost before in military strategy class."

"You know a lot. I wonder who told you that... Well, the rumors are not wrong... I pull up my grades with military strategy, but it is something akin to playing chess."

"But Marquis Tennessee hired you to be a tactician, not a chess player right?"

"I am just a junior tactician staff. I was just 15 after graduating from military academy, so it was something like apprentice work."

"Be it a junior staff or an apprentice, I think it is amazing to be a tactician at such a tender age... Are you dissatisfied?"

"No way! I think the Marquis only employed me on a whim... But I am still grateful for his kindness, even now."

That is why Regis eyes became watery when he parted with the Marquis. Regis grips his luggage tightly, crushing his bag.

"... Marquis says I was needed. But... I left him to face his death."

His tone is so low that it seems to be someone else's voice.

Altina's expression became heavy.

"If I remember correctly, Marquis Tennessee in that summer battle..."

"Ah..."

She knows a lot for a temporary hire, Regis thought. Is she concerned with the war because she is living in the front lines, or is Altina a weirdo. Or maybe there is some other reason.

"Left him to face his death? What happened?"

"That is just how my opinion..."

"I want to know your opinion. Not through rumors, but directly from you... Nah, can you tell me?"

Regis considers it.

It is a long journey. There is nothing to hide, it was published in the newspapers after the military court sessions anyway.

It happened one day during that summer--

He remembers the words and expression of everyone clearly, but he doesn't know where to start.

He took some time to organize his thoughts.

"... During that war council... Marquis Tennessee used the proposals submitted by the head tactician. Well, the minor details are not important. We were fighting 500 barbarians with 3000 empire soldiers. With victory in our grasp, the council focuses less on the battle and more on chit chat on which wine should accompany duck meat for dinner."

"So they were in victory mode before the battle started?"

"It was common, the empire army is strong... But the problem is our lack of contingency plans if the savages flank us and attack our rear."

"The opponents are barbarians right? Isn't it a waste of time to plan for that?"

"That's right, the undisciplined savages are unlikely to pull such a move off successfully, so they prefer to clash head to head. But according to past records, there are instances of them conducting such sneak attacks when there are huge disparities in numbers. There is a need to be careful... I proposed this twice. But the head tactician dismissed me as a coward, and suggested the Marquis to watch for our victory from the rear... something like that."

"So you were chased out of headquarters."

"Ah..."

The military court session had a similar debate, and the atmosphere is shifting towards the interrogation of Regis.

Should he have proposed a third time even if they bark at him? That's what he thought now. If he had insisted on his viewpoint, they could have defended against the sneak attack.

Altina mutters.

"Are you blaming yourself?"

"... I was afraid of punishment more severe than banishment from headquarters... so I didn't propose a 3rd time."

"The head tactician was a noble right?"

"Yeah, I think he was...?"

"If that is the case, he won't accept a commoner's proposal no matter how many times you try. Marquis Tennessee can't do anything if it compromises the status of a noble."

"Ah..."

Regis was a commoner unaccustomed to aristocracy, so he didn't take into account that the Marquis might be hesitant to belittle the head tactician.

If only he had thought deeper. He had the knowledge of the social status of aristocrats.

Altina consoles him:

"That's why you shouldn't blame yourself."

"No, now that you mentioned it, I realize the reason for his behavior... It is my fault for overlooking the delicate relations between nobles... If I approached the Marquis in person instead of doing so during the war council... Maybe... Tch!!"

Regis grits his teeth. His stomach feels heavy and his eyes are heating up. Tears seep into his vision.

Altina suddenly called out to him in a commanding tone.
"Regis Alric!"

"Eh?"

Compared to having his named called, the forceful nature of the voice was more shocking to him. This makes him doubt whether this girl is really a simple driver.

"Don't be too hard on yourself. You did your best, isn't that right?"

"...Ah, that is true. But I don't want to think that the Marquis died to

protect a reputation of a noble... But because I was too naive."

But I understand that now, Regis thought.

Altina nods.

Looking up, they see several white shadows drifting down from the sky.

"Snow..."

She mumbles.

Regis shrugs.

"Snowing on my first day here... They are welcoming me... Hahaha."

"You won't be able to laugh if this turns into a blizzard."

"Yeah, I know."

"You lived in the north before?"

"I read about it in books."

"...Ah, is that so... I need to speed up, hang on and don't fall!"

Altina lets out a sound that is a mix of anger and surprise as she whips the horse.

The wolves are howling from afar.

Ah Wooo! The sound of wild beast intimidates travelers. It is the same for the horse pulling the wagon.

The horse suddenly shakes its head and veers off course.

"Go back!"

Altina pulls the reins.

The horse starts to neigh.

Regis was stunned.

The wagon skid on the snow covered road as the wheels lost traction. It is tilted towards one end.

The bricks and timber cargo stowed under the cloth tumble noisily. The noise stops with an unpleasant sound of wood snapping.

The impact threw Regis into the air.

"Uwah!?"

"Endure!"

The one screaming is Regis, while Altina is grabbing his shoulders and supporting him.

They avoided falling off the wagon.

The wagon stopped in the middle of the road.

The horse stops and starts to neigh.

After a while it calms down and looks towards the driver seat.

I screwed up -- The horse seems to realize that. Just like an uneasy child who messed up.

Altina jumps off the driver seat and caresses the head of the horse.

"Are you okay? Where are you hurt?"

The horse neighs in reply.

Regis doesn't know what it means, but he sees that Altina is examining the right hind leg of the horse.

"Is it injured?"

"... It can run if we force it too... But if its leg deteriorates beyond healing, it will be put down."

She sighs as she caresses the horse.

She unfastens the harness from the horse to let it rest, and ties the reins down to prevent it from wandering off.

Regis looks towards the smoking horizon over the snowy plain.

"How far are we from Century fortress?"

"About 5 Li (22km) away... But it is impossible to start walking."

"Why?"

"Because a blizzard is coming. Without any lights, it will be pitch dark at night. If we veer off course onto the wheat field, we won't reach the Fortress even if we walk till day break. We might even fall into a ditch."

"Well, I don't want to walk 5 Li with my luggage either."

"Are you really a soldier!?"

"Haha, my grades for loaded march were terrible. This is more survival training than loaded march training."

Ha~, Altina sigh as she presses her temple.

Regis tilts his head.

"What now?"

"Isn't it the tactician's job to think of a way?"

"Well, my command abilities have been praised before... but this situation is better suited for soldiers, merchants or adventurers."

"Aren't you a soldier?!"

"Oh, that's right."

"What a surprising man."

"Hey, calm down Altina. Humans can pull it off if we put our minds to it."

"Right... Freezing to death in a blizzard is something that can be pulled off."

"How stern."

"So you really have no ideas?"
"Hmmm, right... let's read this."

Regis took out the book he bought in town.

"Ah, you mean that book can be used in this situation? Well done!"

"I wonder. This work describes the life of a young man who encounters a fairy and the 6 beautiful ladies around him. A slice of life and fantasy novel."

"Are you stupid? This is not the place for nonsensical stories!?"

"It's rude to dismiss it as nonsense. Apologize to the author."

"You will freeze into a Popsicle if this goes on, you won't be able to

read anymore! The priest will read some scriptures for you though."

"That is why... I want to read the last book I bought."

"You are giving up too easily!"

"Just joking. It is not good panicking. We have to calm down and think. Let's climb up the wagon. It's much better to have some shelter."

"...You are right."

Altina's head and shoulders are covered in snow when she enters the wagon.

The timber and bricks are piled up on one side because of the wagon skidding earlier.

Regis sat down on an empty spot.

Altina sat down nearby.

"It's great that the winds are blocked."

"But it is still cold."

"It can't be helped. I will take a warm shower when we reach the fortress. I definitely will!"

"How luxurious for a driver... Could it be that you are acquainted with someone important within the fortress?"

"Urgh."

Altina stutters for unknown reasons.

Was his guess close to the truth?

"Well, I will find out when we reach the fortress."

"If we reach the fortress..."

The snow and wind picks up. It is a full blown blizzard.

The breeze is strong enough to enter the shelter, making Altina's shoulders shiver.

"Ugugu..."

Regis search through his memories of a book he read.

"As I thought, it is better not to wander off in this situation..."

"Is that so?"

"Compared to expending energy to move, it is better to wait for other wagons to pass by. How concerned do you think the people in the fortress will be about you? Will they forget about a temporary driver? Or are there friends waiting for you?"

"Well... I think they will not forget about me. They should be... worried about me. Probably."

"In that case, there is a high chance a search party will come before night fall. There is only one road between the fortress and the town. They will see us if they go to town, lessening our burden."

"I see... your mind turns quite fast."

"It's just my knowledge."

I read a story with similar situation -- For Regis, that's all.

"Next is to use items that will help us get over the cold."

"Yeah, there is something!"

"Hmmm?"

"There is a cloth over the luggage compartment. It is rather small though."

Altina pulls out a rough piece of cloth from under the timber as she speaks.

"It really is small."

"But it is thick and warm, so use it."

"Thank you... Use it, Altina."

"Eh...?"

"I might look this way, but I am still a soldier. Protecting the citizens is the duty of a soldier, right?"

"That's just a phrase."

"But I am serious."

"Fu, what an interesting person, you... How about this?"

Altina takes the cloth, sit to the left of Regis and lean onto him.

Regis left arm links with Altina's right arm.

"Wha, What!?"

"This way, one piece of cloth can provide warmth for two people, right?"

"Ah... I see, is that right?"

Compared to the cloth, the body heat of the young girl makes him

warmer.

His heart races so much that his back is sweating.

Regis tells himself in his heart -- calm down me. She is only 14. Still an underage girl younger than me. She is really pretty, but to lose my cool because our arms are linked is really shameful for an adult.

Altina's face closes in.

"Are you fine? Your face is really red..."

"It, it's nothing."

"Is that so..."

Regis calms down.

He can only hear the wind and Altina's breathing.

"...Regis."

"Eh? Wha, what?"

"I think you are an interesting person."

"Haha... I get that a lot."

"The soldier should protect civilians, that is just an official motto that are said but not followed. There are more people who think soldiers are more valuable."

"That might be so... But shouldn't those with power protect those without? That is the reason why humans form society. Just like adults protecting children, it is the same with the strong protecting the weak... So soldiers should protect civilians, that's what I think."

"That means the aristocrats have to protect the commoners, the

emperor has to protect his citizens, right?"

"That should be the way. Although the nobles are fighting meaningless wars and wasting the lives and wealth of the citizens."

"Is the war with the barbarians useless? We can't begin peace negotiation with them, and we will be massacred if we lose in a war, right?"

"... That's right, the savages are terrifying. But they should lure the barbarians to a more defensible position and build long and sturdy walls if they really want to protect the nation."

"Can't they scale the walls easily?"

"It is hard for cavalry and wagons to pass through, so that will be enough to deter large armies."

"Oh I see... Why aren't the generals doing that? They didn't think of that?"

"What I am saying is knowledge as common as books. The upper classes want to fight on because this is a business for them. Repelling the barbarians will earn them prestige as a soldier. The weapons and food can be sold at a high price during war. Military academy training troops are also a source of income for the nobles. It burdens the nation as a whole, but those with authority will stand to gain..."

"This is unforgivable!"

Altina's face closes in on Regis almost hitting him.

Regis was pushed back by Altina's intimidating air and backed away.

However he can't escape because their arms are linked.

"Calm, calm down Altina... I am not saying all aristocrats are like

that. I think Marquis Tennessee doesn't act this way."

"... Really?"

"Yeah, he even proposed to the emperor opposing the expansion of the empire's territory, and to focus on strengthening the security of the nation instead. He was the one who suggested the plan to construct defensive walls during the aristocratic conference."

"That is a great idea! That should cut down on the casualties and poverty rate after a battle!"

Altina's eyes are sparkling because of Regis' words.--

The two of them turn silent a short while later.

Regis saw her dangerous expression for an instance.

"... Could it be this incident?"

"Hmmm? What is it Altina?"

"Nah, I just thought of something unimportant. That's right, there are all sorts of people among the nobles."

"Yeah, that is why it is troubling if the emperor doesn't manage them well."

Regis says with a bitter laugh.

Altina's body trembled. Regis noticed because they are so close together.

"... Do you think the current emperor... is bad?"

"If I say he is bad, I will be convicted for treason..."

Maybe it is too late now. But this is in the middle of a blizzard. Only

Altina and the horse are listening.

Regis begins his monologue.

"The current emperor has reigned for too long. His body is too weak to handle his administrative duties. The first prince should have succeeded him 5 years ago. But the first prince is sickly and weak while the 2nd prince displayed his talents in politics and the military. The 2nd prince has a stronger backing too."

"That seems complicated."

"The 1st prince was born to the 2nd concubine. The 2nd prince was born after this to the queen. The queen enjoys higher status as an aristocrat too. This resulted in succession issues within the empire."

"The fight for the crown between the princes... is the fight between their supporters. This caused the extension of the emperor's time on the throne. This lead to the nobles doing as they please and the wave of corruption."

"There are other imperial children besides them."

"Well, the third prince is just a 15 year old student. He is a dark horse that probably can't stand up to his brothers."

"There, there is one more... right?"

"Hmm? Ah... speaking of which, the commander of Century Fortress is a royalty."

"Yes! What about that person?"

Altina leans in again and Regis retreats to the right. He is almost falling out of the luggage compartment.

"Erm, the Arrow-Sparrow Princess. Nobody remembers the full name because it is too long."

"Well, it is rather long..."

"I think she is called Marie Garter Argentina Bulgaria... I can remember the story in books, but it is hard to memorize such a long name."

"Don't push yourself. By the way, what is the Arrow-Sparrow Princess?"

"I will be under her care for now on, it will be troubling to say things akin to badmouthing her... This is her nick name in the capital."

"So, what does it mean?"

"What I learned are from word of mouth... Well, we have ample time anyway. This is the story of a pitiful princess who was forced to the nation's border--"

15 years ago--

For the background, let's talk about the mother of Marie Garter.

In the imperial capital Versailles, the emperor is hosting his grand 50th birthday party.

The court orchestra is playing waltz. Lavish dishes are presented one after another, the generals share their victory reports as gifts. Not only powerful nobles and famous tycoons are here, even the lower class aristocrats and their family are invited, that's how grand the party was.

Among the peasants sitting at the end of the seat is a breathtakingly beautiful young girl.

Her hair is as dark as night and her eyes as black as obsidian, contrasting with her snow white skin, making it even whiter.

Unbelievably, the one chatting with this 16 year old girl is the emperor who left his throne and walked slowly across the room.

"Will you dance with me my lady?"

According to the records of the imperial scribe, Claudette Bartholomew bows curtsy politely and replied:

"It is my pleasure. How may I address you?"

As for why she asked for the emperor's name, there are several theories. 'Not noticing' seems too offending. 'Noticed, but following the rites of a party' and 'she is a bold lady who dares to joke with his majesty' are more convincing theories.

But she is the only one who knows the truth.

The beautiful brunette girl extends her hand, and the emperor smiles as he takes her hand.

"Pardon me. I am Liam Fernando de Bulgaria. The people address me as Liam the 15th."

"Then, please call me Claudette."

The conductor known as the best in the empire waves his baton after a moment of hesitation and the orchestra came alive.

This is commonly known as the Claudette incident.

Half a year later--

Ms Claudette who is now 17 became the 4th concubine of the emperor.

Her name is changed to 'Marie Claudette de Bulgaria'. It was rumored that she was pregnant during the wedding.

The concubine bore the emperor his 4th successor before his 51st birthday. She is Marie Garter Argentina de Bulgaria.

She is officially the legitimate daughter of the emperor, but she is considered an illegitimate child by the masses.

When Liam the 15th received news of the birth of his 4th child he was said to have asked "Is the hair red?".

The first emperor of Bulgaria known as the 'Flame Emperor' had crimson hair, red eyes and a stock body. He defeated the surrounding barbaric tribes and established the foundation of the empire.

Liam the 15th is the same, he is a huge man with red hair and crimson eyes, despite having a frail body.

Although the 3 princes have crimson eyes, they inherited the blonde and brown color of their mother's hair, and they are not huge in build either. Liam the 15th does not concern himself with military and financial affairs, but the thinning of the 1st emperor's blood made him sad.

The chief chamberlain fidgets as he bows and reports:

"Your majesty, the hair is red, but it is a girl."

Liam the 15th's concern for the child seems to stop at this moment.

A commoner becoming a concubine and bearing a child in less than a year. This is unbearable shame for the aristocrats hungering for glory.

If Claudette's child is a boy, he might have been assassinated. Rumors have already spread, saying 'the body of the 1st prince is frail because of poisoning.'.

Fortunately, Marie Garter was born a girl and grew up peacefully

until she was 13.

She learns about swords and politics even though she is a girl, her strange actions have become a joke in the courts.

But as she becomes old enough to enter the social circle, a problem arises.

Marie Garter's beauty exceeds her mother.

At this time, a handsome bard with a solid voice was very popular in the social world. This man was invited to the courts by the queen--when he passed by Marie Garter, the bard started singing praises of her beauty.

"Oh~ what a beautiful, beautiful day! This sun like angel makes me dazed! Your flames burns my very soul, the dazzling ruby steals my words and woes!"

And of course, this infuriates the queen. The bard was chased out of the court and banished from the social world.

Things did not end here. The queen's son, the 2nd prince Alan de Laterleo Bulgaria is a dangerous man with a mind as sharp as swords. Although he is just the commander of the first army, he has been taking command of the entire military at the age of 23, standing in for his aged father and frail brother.

Laterleo presents a proposal to the elderly king.

"If the beautiful princess commands the army, it will ignite the passion among the troops. I suggest posting the princess to the northern war zone."

"A brilliant plan."

At this moment, Liam 15th's adoration for Claudette is totally gone.

Empire year 850--

The aged king sits on his throne with nobles smiling coldly lined on either side of the red carpet.

The 4th concubine is not present.

Marie Garter flicks her crimson hair behind and kneels.

"Greetings, Your Majesty."

"..."

Liam the 15th simply nods in reply.

The chief chamberlain opens the imperial edict and reads it out in the name of the emperor.

The age requirement for Marie Garter was waived because of her royal lineage, and she was appointed the commander of Parismiso border regiment.

Snickers break out among the aristocrats.

There is no one present who knew what the princess is thinking.

After dismissing the chief chamberlain, the elderly king asks softly:

"... What would you like as a parting gift?"

This is a traditional question that is asked when blood relative of the emperor leaves the capital. According to tradition, the answer is 'The words of Your Majesty motivates me more than any present I might take.' But...

Marie Garter puffs her chest and said:

"Please grant me a sword of the Flame Emperor."

The crowd turns rowdy.

The nobles throw obvious looks of disdain.

'Don't you even know proper manners you beggar?' Someone insulted.

The emperor considers for a moment.

"...The founding emperor had 7 swords. You are my 4th child, so I will grant you the 4th sword. When you next return to the capital, just deposit it back into the treasury."

The 4th sword--

An armored soldier carried in an oversized double edged sword.

Named as 'Emperor's Thunder Quartet'.

The giant sword was made according to the height of the first emperor, 26Pa (192cm) long.

Although Marie Garter is tall for a lady, the sword is too thick and long, making the difference in height comedic.

The audience hall was filled with the despicable laughter of the aristocrats. The princess will probably leave without even touching the sword-- most of the people present thought.

"I am grateful... I will borrow this... Hya!"

Marie Garter used all her might.

The marble floor creaks under the pressure.

She lifted the sword.

The snickering stops and turn into surprise.

The princess lifted up a sword taller than she is.

"... I will take on this heavy responsibility of my appointment."

She bowed towards the elderly emperor.

She looked at the stoned face 2nd prince and the hateful glare of the queen.

Only Marie Garter knew what she was thinking, the world can only guess.

She turned and left the silent audience hall behind.

"Well, that is the gist of the story."

The blizzard is shaking the shelter.

Altina asks after Regis finished.

"Wait a minute."

"Hmm?"

"Where did the nick name Arrow-Sparrow Princess come from?"

"Ah, didn't the princess wear the sword on her waist?"

"Is there a problem? There is no other way, the sword is too long. It will drag on the sword along the floor if it is put it onto the back."

"Did Altina see her too? Does the princess wear her sword that way in fortress Century?"

"Eh? Well, yes... I have seen her before."

"Have you thought about it? When the soldiers and peasants see the petite Marie Garter wearing the sword that way, they think it looks like a sparrow shot by an arrow."

"What!?"

Altina open her eyes wide, stunned.

"It is hard to beautify her image now. She has not made any appearance in public and has no famed endeavors. Everyone has tied the nickname Arrow-Sparrow Princess with her. I was away on the front lines so I have never seen her."

"Gugugu..."

"Are you okay, your shoulders are trembling... Is it cold?"

"That's not it! I have no reason to complain to you, but it can't be helped!"

"Please keep it a secret from her. It will be hard to live here if she hates me."

"You can relax. She is not dumb enough to hate the person who happens to utter the rumor."

Regis shrugs.

"That will be great... Oh yah, are you hungry? You haven't had lunch yet correct?"

"What have you got?"

"I left some bread to eat while I read."

Regis opens his bag, shifted the sword and took out the toasted bread.

"Although I would prefer some warm milk right now."

"Are you sharing it with me?"

"I told you my principles. I won't force you."

"... I want some."

Regis smiles as he cut the bread in half and gave one to Altina.

"Here."

"Thank you... There are different kinds of smiles."

Altina mumbles as she stares at the bread.

After finishing the hard bread, Regis asked:

"Did you say something?"

"... I have seen colder smiles."

"Hmmm~ where did you see that?"

"Imperial court."

Nom, Altina takes a bite of the bread.

The horse suddenly neighs.

It's an urgent neigh begging for help.

The two of them looks out towards the driver seat's direction.

"Is something..."

"That!"

Altina points with her finger. The front of the wagon, where the front legs of the horse are pointing.

There are five shadows in the blizzard.

A black light shimmers in its golden eyes.

There are 5 blood colored mouths.

Regis feels as if a demon is clutching his heart.

"... Wolves."

"Grey wolves (Loup Gris)."

"Fire... We need to throw torches at them. Ah, do you have a tinderbox!?"

"Calm down Regis! There is no way I have one."

"Ugh... You are right."

"The horse will be in danger if this goes on."

"After that will be us... Ugugu... Tch!!"

Regis retreats to the luggage compartment near the shelter.

He picks up his sword and jumps off the back of the wagon.

Altina squints her eyes and sighs.

"Well, even though he says he will protect the citizens..."

No matter how cool he was saying it, it is a different matter when his life is on the line. Altina knows this.

Is he the same? Altina thought.

But Regis went around to the front of the wagon.

He did not run away.

He lifts his sword and face at the largest wolf.

"Ugugguggu!"

"What, what are you doing? Even a knight will have a tough fight when facing grey wolves!"

"I know! That's why I am doing this!"

Regis hands are not shaking because of the cold.

His stance was that of a novice.

No, worse than that.

His back is hunched and there is no power in his hips, he looks like he is going to turn and run at any moment.

Even a child playing around will have a straighter stance.

Altina grabs her head with her arms.

"Can you win this way!?"

"Haha... It is nothing to be proud of, but I have never won in sword sparring before."

"That is really nothing to be proud of."

"Go, Altina... Take the horse and force it to run. We will become lunch for the wolves if this carries on..."

"Are you serious? You will die!?"

A scream filled with sadness.

Regis smiles.

It is not a smile to ease Altina, or because he has something up his sleeve. It is a smile that came naturally.

Even Regis doesn't understand why.

"Even so... Death is more pleasant than living a twisted life."

"Ah!"

Altina gasps.

Even Regis thinks it is weird. Why is he smiling? Is he mocking his moronic self? No, that is too negative. Just mark it as a victory for holding true to your principles despite the dire situation.

"Even I could buy some time. The wolves won't attack easily when facing foes that approach them instead of running. It will gauge the opponent’s strength and only close in when it is sure of its victory... Ah, eh? I think they are closing in on me!?"

"That's right, your stance seems very weak."

Altina's voice sounds cheerful for some reason. It is as if she is smiling?

The largest wolf closes in.

It opens its maw lined with sharp fangs and growls.

Although the distance is still far, Regis swings his sword to intimidate the wolves.

"Hah, hee!!"

He leans to one side because of the heavy sword.

The sword tip hits the ground.

A knocking sound was made. The sword hilt hits Regis' left knee.

"~~~Ugh!?"

"Thank you Regis. You have successfully protected the citizen. Protected the wagon driver Altina."

"Eh?"

Regis turns his head because of the cheerful tone.

Altina' crimson eyes are shining.

She took something silver out from the luggage compartment. It shines brightly even in the darkness of the blizzard.

Pushing the bricks and timber away, the girl pulled out the item hidden underneath with her lean arm.

A rattling sound can be heard.

Something amazing and unbelievable is happening.

It was heavy, broad, thick and huge.

It took some time to register what the item was because of its large size.

The wagon barely hides its full length. A lump of metal too heavy for humans to wield.

Putting its colossal size aside, it has been polished clean without any stains.

The body of the blade is just like a mirror.

Regis' lips are trembling.

"... The Emperor’s Thunder Quartet."

Altina is holding the sword of kings in her right hand.

The cloak she is wearing is fluttering in the wind like the cape of a ruler. Her flaming red hair was flicked to her back with her left hand.

"It is time for me to protect you, Regis. Watch closely."

"Wut…!?"

"Is this sword just an oversized arrow stuck on a sparrow, or is it a blade wielded by a king!"

Altina's legs sink into the snow.

She kicks the snow away and moves forward.

The sword in her hand howls as it slices through the air.

"Hahh~~~!!!"

She slashed it down.

Shattering the earth.

The snow on the ground explodes.

Instead of a slash, this is closer to being a direct cannon hit, Regis thought.

He can feel the tremors in the ground.

The grey wolves will probably back off.

-- My guess was right.

The only thing that was blown away is the snow, the grey wolves have retreated to a safe distance and escaped certain death.

Altina take out the bread from her chest and threw it to the wolves.

"Hee!"

The bread went with the wind and fell before the wolves.

"This is for you! Hurry up and go home!"

The wolf cautiously sniffed the bread, ate it and ran off.

They disappeared into the white fog of the blizzard.

Regis relaxed his tense waist and collapse.

Altina stuck the sword into the ground and faced him.

"Are you injured?"

"Huff, huff... My left knee hurts."

"Didn't you hit that with your own sword?"

"I was in a dream back then, so I don't remember."

Altina smiles awkwardly.

Regis scratched his head.

"I'm impressed with you... No... Your royal highness Marie Garter Argentina de Bulgaria, 4th royal princess... Is that right your highness?"

"Isn't it too late for this?"

"Hah, you are mean."

All Regis can do is sigh.

Altina was all smiles after pulling off her scheme successfully.

"You really didn't notice?"

"Well, I noticed your red hair and eyes, but Altina seems too long a nickname for Argentina."

"That's what my mother calls me."

"Argentina is the name of Claudette Bartholomew's homeland. And Altina is the nickname for that place..."

"Why didn't you notice if you knew that?"

"It was too preposterous, so I dismiss it in my head. The commander of the unit I am transferring to is the 4th royal princess. For the princess to pick me up in the guise of a wagon driver is a bit much."

"I thought I will be found out in the bookshop and was nervous for a while."

"I understand the suspicious behavior of the shopkeeper now. Are you always doing things like this?"

"No! If I keep doing this, rumors of a moronic princess will spread."

"...We were in town earlier, did the news already spread... Delivery Service Princess."

"That sounds better than Arrow-Sparrow Princess."

She is seriously troubled over this.

Regis tilted his head.

"You said that you don't always pull stunts like this... So why me? Do you have a grudge against me?"

"Grudge?"

"No matter how positive I look at this, I have disrespected the emperor. Putting my manners towards your disguised self aside, criticizing the emperor is a heavy crime."

"Why did you say it if you knew it was a crime?"

"Such conversations are nothing more than a greeting among commoners."

Hmm, Altina put her hands on her hips and frowns.

After calming down, the situation is turning bad. The storm is still brewing while the temperature will fall after the sun sets.

"I don't want you to misunderstand. I don't have a grudge against you and have no intention of indicting you for criticism against the emperor."

"Then, why?"

"Because I heard a rumor that you were a capable tactician."

"Are you talking about me? I think it is exaggerated."

"I think there is a possibility... I need the help of able men... Not just capable, but also ones that have the right values and principles. I need to investigate further."

"That's why you disguised yourself as a driver?"

"There are things that won't be said before royalty right? I want to listen to your true real thoughts, Regis Alric."

"The only thing you found out today is that I have zero passion towards military affairs."

"Your swordsmanship too."

Altina jokes as Regis scratched his head.

She suddenly looks to the distance.

"Ah... Seems like your hunch was right."

"What?"

Altina listens intently.

Regis follows her lead.

Shortly after--

Sounds of horse hooves running in the snowy road can be heard.

She was just talking to me earlier, her hearing is great. Regis is impressed.

"... Ah, but could they be bandits or barbarians?"

"I can hear metallic armor, so it is them."

"You can hear that too?"

As she spoke, five horsemen appears from the direction of the blizzard.

The armored knight dismounted before Altina.

They kneeled.

"Princess, are you alright!?"

A bald middle aged man with black beard asked.

Altina nods.

"Thank you for picking me up. I am well... But the horse is injured."

"I understand! Let my horse pull the wagon."

"Yes, I leave it to you."

The horse drawn wagon is back in action after substituting the horse.

The injured horse was guided back with its reins.

Two soldiers lift Altina's sword and bring it towards the cargo compartment.

After glancing at the soldiers carrying out their task, Altina walks towards Regis.

Her white hand reached for Regis who is sitting down from exhaustion.

"Come, time to go."

"Erm... Your highness, princess?"

"Forget it, it's too late for you to address me that way."

"No, I thought you were a driver back then..."

"It will dampen my mood. You said you will call me by my nickname earlier. Were you lying?"

"Eh..."

It's because of you are disguising as a wagon driver. But Regis can't say that.

Regis' back is drenched in cold sweat.

He thought it was bad being banished to the border regions. But he might have arrived at an incredible place.

He raised his head and looked towards the sky.

Regis reached out towards the hand extended towards him.

"... I think I am someone who can tell the mood... But is it really okay, Altina?"

Of course! Her voice is full of energy as she speaks.

"Welcome to my border regiment. I will work you really hard, Regis Alric!"

Chapter 2 - Promise at Dawn

Regis was deep in slumber.

A voice reached him from a very close distance.

He couldn't tell if it was a dream or reality, but it was the voice of a girl.

"He is totally not getting up! Is he dead?"

"Fufufu... He is probably exhausted. Princess, since there are no urgent tasks, let him rest."

"... Mu, can't be helped."

There was still some time before he awakened.

Regis was woken up by a chorus of angry yells.

"Hah!"

"...ugh?"

Regis opened his eyes.

Before him was an unfamiliar ceiling.

It was built with stones in the shape of an arch, a grey ceiling without any decorations.

A curved line could be drawn from the ceiling to the wall.

This looks like a dungeon, Regis thought in a daze.

Regis was lying on the innermost bed in the room.

He could touch the uneven walls if he stretched his left hand. A window was carved out of the cold wall, and it was open.

Sunlight was shining in from it.

A loud, spirited, manly yell could be heard from somewhere.

"Hya!"

That was probably the soldiers training; the sound of the wind from the slashing weapon and the stomping of the feet could also be heard.

"... Ah... So that's it."

I was banished to Sierck Fortress — Regis recalled as his mind started churning.

The soft bed was heavenly compared to the carriage of the caravan. He was glad to be alive after recalling yesterday's event.

"... Is it morning?"

"Hoh!"

The weird noise started again.

Regis cupped his ears.

"Is it... Always like this here? What a terrible alarm clock..."

He pushed himself up.

He was frozen stiff by the time he had reached Sierck Fortress last night. After getting some warm water, he was told to use this room — he couldn't remember anything after that.

He surveyed the room again; it was spacious enough for four beds and desks. A pillar was placed right in the middle. 10 soldiers bunk in one room. A non-commissioned officer (NCO) like Regis was assigned to a four-men room.

But there was only one bed beside the wall in this room.

Next to the bed was a desk so grand Regis thought someone had mistaken his rank and grade. And it came with a shelf!

It was spacious enough from the bed to the door to accommodate six more big shelves.

Regis instead of happy felt uneasy.

"Is it because there are excess rooms in the countryside? But this fortress is small and cramped... Did they really mix up my rank and grade?"

A fifth grade admin officer was 10 ranks down from the very top.

— Field marshal, general, lieutenant general, major general, brigadier general. These were the general ranks.

Officers were divided into admin and combat officers, first grade, second grade grade and third grade admin officers were commissioned officers.

This was followed by the NCOs, from grade four to six.

This meant the fifth grade admin officer was just two ranks from the bottom.

The rank and file has the rank of lance corporal, trooper first class and light trooper. Even a light trooper in the empire's regular army would enjoy good welfare and wages. Conscripted farmers forming militias and underaged apprentice soldiers were considered voluntary soldiers and were not paid.

And so— for an admin officer two ranks from the bottom to be assigned to such spacious quarters, this must be a mistake, Regis concluded.

"If I don't find someone to lead me to my actual room... Ah, who is my commanding officer?"

The commanding officer of an admin officer would guide Regis in various things as his supervisor.

Regis hadn’t met him yet.

Regis took his clothes off in the room.

It was cold even though it was indoors during daytime. He realised again this really was the north.

He put on the brand new uniform laid out on the desk.

The Belgarian military uniform was elegant with the color palette of green, red and white. But the border regiment's uniform was dull in design with a dark green color that was almost black as its base color. However the material was thick and the pockets were plentiful, a practical design.

"Hmm, the uniform is well thought out, as expected of the regiment at the most forward position."

After dressing up, he heard the shouts of a horde of men.

"... Doesn't seem like anyone is coming. Guess I have to find him myself."

He left the room.

When he opened the door, the stone corridor extended to his left and right.

It could barely fit two people walking side by side. The path meandered slightly, with a few wooden doors adorning the wall.

He headed to the very end of the left corridor and entered the courtyard.

"Hei!"

A chorus of shouts rose again.

The courtyard that was surrounded by stone buildings was a training field where the ground had been compacted by the soldiers' stomps. 30-odd soldiers were practicing their sword swings here.

In front of the orderly ranks was a huge and bulky man.

This man who was made up of muscles and swinging his fauchard with sweat all over his body was about 40 years old.

He had a thick black beard and bald head.

Regis was so cold that he wanted to wear a scarf, but this man was showing off his body full of battle scars, and also dissipating heat.

He smiled after looking at his way.

"Ugu, you are awake, young man!"

What a loud voice.

The muscular youths training in front of him were also shouting "hei!" and "hah!".

They were also topless, hot and sweaty.

The bald man offered his halberd to Regis.

"Good! Come and swing this too! Your fighting spirit will rise with a bang! Swing it swing it, make the wind howl! Wahaha!"

Regis backed away and said:

"No, no... I am an admin officer so using swords and spears is a bit... By the way, you are the knight that aided us yesterday right?"

The man nodded after Regis asked.

"Yes. I am Evrard de Blanchard, first grade combat officer. I am the knight commander of the Beilschmidt regiment!"

"I am Regis Auric, fifth grade admin officer. I am grateful for your aid... You really saved us."

"Wahaha! I was wondering why I couldn't find the princess. So she disguised herself as a wagon driver and snuck into town. And the bandits are rampant lately. That gave me a scare."

"Hahaha, me too."

To think the wagon driver was the royal princess.

"But if it is the princess, she might wipe the bandits out instead!"

"Ah... She is really strong."

"Because she is a goddess!"

After Evrard finished, his subordinate knights nodded and agreed. "Yes! A goddess!"

Regis didn’t understand what they meant.

"I think the princess is a princess...?"

"She is a goddess!"

"... Ah, I remember there is a religion of La Victoire in the north."

"Yes! A goddess!"

"I see..."

The worshiping of idols was banned by the church, but things were less stringent here in the border regions. The restrictive doctrine of the church was less influential 100 Li (444 km) away.

With the way she wielded her giant sword with her thin arms, it was not a stretch for the soldiers to think of it as a holy miracle.

"She scattered the grey wolves with a single strike yesterday! Marvelous! Wahaha... Cough hack hack!"

When Evrard laughed so hard that he choked, these young charges were smiling happily.

"Wahaha!"

Manly voices.

Regis was grateful for their assistance, but he was not comfortable with the manly atmosphere.

"Haha... I will take my leave then..."

Evrard stopped him with a "wait!" just as Regis was going off. He shouldered his heavy halberd and approached with heavy footsteps.

He breathed slowly as he leaned closer.

"I want to ask just in case."

"Wha, what is it?"

"Did you do anything weird to the princess?"

The gaze of the subordinates sharpened suddenly.

Blood vessels appeared on Evrard’s bald head.

Regis took a couple of steps back.

"Anything weird?"

"The princess looked different yesterday. What, did you do?"

"I didn't do anything... Just chatted with her."

"What did you talk about!?"

"Erm, rumors from the capital and stuff..."

The youths muttered among themselves. "He said rumors from the capital." "It must be about the social world." "For farmers, it will be about the yam harvest of some family or which family's cow has given birth." "That's not rumors." "Damn, guys from the cities piss me off." "The capital sucks!"

Regis felt that he was in danger.

Evrard leaned further in, their lips almost touching.

"Ugh~! The princess was acting just like my daughter after her first date! What did you do, brat!"

"Wait, wait! I told her how the capital thinks about the fourth princess and stuff about politics. How can I say those things to a child... And I am not boasting, but I have never held hands with a girl ever!?"

Silence.

The noise was gone.

Evrard smiled gently like a saint depicted in paintings.

His knights showed angelic expressions.

"Be strong, young man."

"Good things will happen one day."

"Fighto."

I don't need such sympathy — Regis thought.

Regis shouldered the useless and gentle encouragement and carried his heart heavy with defeat, leaving the sad courtyard behind.

He went to the corridor before his room and headed down the path to the right instead.

He heard humming.

"Hmm♪ hmm, hmm~♪"

"Huh?"

He peeked in from the open door and saw a big room.

There were eight long tables and 50 chairs arranged in rows.

"Is this the officers' dining hall?"

The stony walls gave off a rugged impression, but the vase with flowers decorating the place made it feel elegant.

A maid was cleaning the table with a rag.

She was the one humming.

Wearing a maid uniform with a red base, with her brown hair tied behind her. She was swaying to the rhythm of her humming.

She was about Regis' age.

The lady's hazel eyes and lovely smile left a deep impression. Her beautiful hair and light skin was really charming when she worked.

"Mmm mmm, hmm hmm~♪ la, lalala~ the lady maid just like Cinderella told the mouse~♪ there will be a party in the castle tonight~♪"

She was singing now.

Her tone was a bit off though.

She twirled around and the food scraps fell to the ground. Was she cleaning or dancing?

Their eyes met.

She noticed Regis standing at the door.

The maid became stiff.

Her singing stopped.

Regis felt the atmosphere becoming tense.

"Oh... what a nice song."

"Eh, really?! You were moved by my song?"

"I didn't say I was moved..."

"This is a popular song that is trending lately~"

"I see, but this is the first time I've heard it... Is it popular in this

fortress? Or is it famous in the streets of Tuonvell?"

"Wrong, it is trending in my heart!"

"So it's just you!"

"I came up with it just now."

"Didn't you say it's trending lately?"

Ignoring Regis' retort, the maid explained the song with a smile.

"Hufufu... It's about a mean-spirited master badly treating his maid. And then, a granny with magical powers turns up. It's really romantic."

He read a similar tale before. Regis nodded.

"Did the granny use magic to help the maid attend the party in the castle?"

"What story is that? The song is about the granny using combat spells to turn the mean master into an oily splat.

"Where is the element of romance?! What a direct use of magic. Are you dissatisfied with your current treatment?"

Magic was just something from fairy tales, so it was just a joke. But he could feel the darkness in her heart from this tale.

The maid smiled dryly.

"Ahaha, that's not it. The princess is a good child. The battles are terrifying, but it is safe inside the fortress. It is just that the future looks a bit grim."

She was a maid with a sharp tongue.

She followed the proper etiquette and introduced herself again.

"I am the handmaid serving the princess, Clarisse. Please address me as 'hey' or 'wench'."

"I won't use such a mean way of addressing you!? Hah~... Allow me to address you as Ms. Clarisse. I am Regis Auric."

"Yes! I heard a lot about you from the princess."

"Really? What did you hear?"

"Letting the princess use the only blanket in a blizzard, and sharing your bread with her. And facing the grey wolves courageously, things like that. I think your actions are outstanding."

"You flatter me... This is embarrassing. Anything else?"

"You are also worse at swordsmanship than a child, and a loser who spends all his money on books~"

"Sorry."

He shouldn't have pressed on.

Clarisse smiled as if she had no ill intentions.

"Is there any way I can be of service? Contrary to how I look, I am actually quite busy. Just kidding."

She meant no harm. Probably.

"Do you know who my commanding officer is? Have you heard?"

"I don't know about things like that."

"You are right. Then Altina... Ah, no... Can you tell me where the princess is?"

"Fufu... I know about the nickname so that's alright. But please restrain yourself if people other than me or the princess are present."

"I see. Very few people have permission to address her this way?"

I have to be careful of the knights in the courtyard, Regis thought.

"I think she granted me that privilege... The only other person would be her mother?”

That's fewer than he thought.

Regis felt more confusion than joy.

"Then... Why?"

"Are you asking why the princess has few friends? That's because of her character~"

"What an evil tongue... That's not what I meant, why did she allow me to call her by her nickname? It might be refreshing for royalty to be asked their name, but that's natural if she dresses like a wagon driver. I am probably not the first commoner she is acquainted with..."

Clarisse tilted her head.

"I don't know what the princess is thinking... Did she think of you as a confidant? Despite how it looks, she is in a difficult position."

"Confidant..."

"Yes, the same level of trust she has in her mother..."

"Is that so..."

Regis recalled his meeting with the redhead girl.

Because he bought a really expensive book— she asked whether he was an idiot— was that related?

Clarisse waved her hands with a smile.

"Mah, you tend to make mistakes when you are young~"

"You conclude her trust in me is a 'mistake of youth'?! I can't prove otherwise, but isn't it too early to judge it so?"

"I'm joking. Because Mr Regis reacts to everything I say. Seems like those words have a great impact on you."

"Don't tease me..."

"Because if I say it with Evrard and friends, they will just reply 'yeah, a goddess!', a really vague answer."

"Ah, that's what the knight commander will do."

Regis smiled bitterly as he recalled the topless, sweating knight commander he met in the courtyard.

Back on topic, he asked for Altina's whereabouts again.

Clarisse gazed at the clock on the wall.

"She's out. She will be back in a while."

"Out of the fortress? That's early if she went to town. She has a serious character so she probably didn't go out to play... Is she hunting or scouting?"

"Something like that. By the way— everyone has taken their breakfast, what about you, Mr Regis?"

"Thank you, I was about to faint from hunger."

"I see, it will be harsh~ There is quite some time before lunch."

"Why is the scene where you offer me breakfast missing?!"

"Ahaha, can't be helped, it's a special service this time."

Although Clarisse was a maid that kept playing around, she was quick with her work, bringing out some food in no time.

It was soft bread and vegetable stew with chicken meat.

It was a luxurious meal since they were on the front lines.

"Amazing..."

"Please enjoy your meal."

Clarisse continued her chores with a smile. She hummed as she cleaned the tables with a duster.

Regis enjoyed his breakfast leisurely.

As Regis was finishing his late breakfast—

Altina showed up at the dining hall.

"Ara, Regis. It's great that you are alive."

"Thanks to you."

Altina didn't dress up like a wagon driver or wore her sword today.

She had put on a one piece dress with laces, equipped with minimal armour which were gauntlets and shoulder protectors.

She had a snowy white coat under her arm, that was taken by the maid Clarisse with a bow.

"Welcome back princess."

"Thank you Clarisse. Can I have some tea please?"

"Understood."

Clarisse bowed again and left quietly.

Surprisingly, she was acting like a maid seriously.

Altina sat to the opposite of Regis.

"Hah, it's no good today too..."

"I heard you were out?"

"I was patrolling the streets. Some time ago, bandits targeting caravans appeared."

"I heard about that on my journey too. The probability of bandit attacks rises the further away from central you are."

The deterioration of security in town was one of the reasons of price inflation. It had caused failed deliveries and additional costs of hiring armed escorts.

"It's difficult for the caravans and the citizens."

"Have you heard rumors of the impending attack by the barbarians?"

"How is the situation really like? I can't find relevant evidence here so I am not sure either. It is impossible for the soldiers stationed in the fortress to protect all the caravans."

"That's why the commander herself is patrolling this early in the morning. The time when you just wake up and its cold."

"Because everyone hates that shift, so the commander should lead by example."

"Oh... That's impressive."

"I didn't really want to patrol. It will be best if the bandits just disappear!"

"I think so too."

The books would be cheaper if it becomes safer.

Altina used her entire vocabulary of swear words to curse the hiding bandits.

After she was done, Regis changed the topic.

"By the way, I want to greet my commanding officer... Who will that be? Has it been decided?"

"Commanding officer... You mean the leader of the admin officers?"

"Yes."

"There are none."

"No commissioned admin officers want me?"

"Hmm. Apart from you, there are no other admin officers in this fortress."

Regis sat stiff because he couldn’t comprehend the words he was hearing.

Regis squeezed out some words after a while.

"... What did you say?"

"This regiment has always been under the command of general Margrave Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt. He chased all the admin officers away half a year ago."

"What is going on? Can they fight a war with only combat officers...? Who is in charge of the accounts and resupplies? The battle reports? Tax collection and submission?"

"The Margrave's Chamberlain is doing it."

Chamberlains were administrators taking care of the estate of nobles.

They handled the collection of tax within the territory and the

purchase and sale of goods. They even the handled the distribution of salary for the servants. They were often tapped on to handle accounting works, so there was no problem letting them handle huge amounts of paperwork.

"What an outstanding Chamberlain, as expected of a Margrave house. Was he an ex admin officer?"

Documents related to the military were unique and complicated; Regis spent two years in military academy to learn the ropes.

While Regis was feeling impressed...

Altina shook her head.

"We receive letters of complaint every month because of the errors, and the inspectors even came to audit us."

"What?! How could this be... Is this really the Belgarian Empire?"

"The ones originally stationed here are Jerome's private army."

"I think I read that in a book. When my assignment to the borders was confirmed, I took the chance to investigate lots of things."

"... You are really weird. Normally, you will feel annoyed about the place you are banished to."

"Do you feel annoyed?"

"I... Have a goal..."

Altina stuttered uncharacteristically.

Regis felt it yesterday too, she was hiding something.

She had not say it because she judged that it wasn't appropriate. Regis stopped this line of thought.

"From the books and rumors, I know about Jerome's brave exploits... But news of him chasing the admin officers out are less widespread. What happened?"

"I asked him before... But he didn't tell me. Because Jerome dislikes me."

"He dislikes you?

Altina nodded with a frail expression.

"If a young girl becomes your boss because of a power struggle you were not involved in, you will dislike that girl too right?"

"So that's why..."

The new commanding officer and the original commander not getting along was a common scene.

Normally, the original commander would be posted to another unit. But Altina was a novice while Sierck Fortress was a strategic position in the north. It might be by the emperor's edict, but transferring Jerome away was too stupid of a move to make.

Altina looked dissatisfied.

"If the regiment is operating normally and protecting the citizens, I have no intentions to butt in..."

"I didn't know there were no admin officers."

"Jerome is not really hardworking either."

Both of them sighed.

Clarisse brought a white porcelain tea pot with two cups.

She placed the cups down and poured a translucent red liquid in.

The fragrance of the tea was strong.

"Sorry for the wait princess. Some sugar for you?"

It was being used casually, but red tea leaves, sugar and porcelain wares were high class items in the empire. It was impossible for them to be military issues items, so they must be the princess' personal stash.

"Thank you Clarisse."

"You are welcome— what about you Mr Regis?"

"You prepared my share too? Thank you."

"What are you saying? I'm asking about your plans for the future."

"Ugh..."

The maid stabbed him with sharp words while wearing an innocent face.

"Ahaha, that is an important question."

Regis' plans for the future was a difficult question; he scratched his head and thought.

"Erm~, why did Jerome send the admin officers away...? There is a need to understand this..."

"That's good, but do you want to help me with my job?"

"Anything that I can help you with?"

He remembered her saying that she would work him really hard.

"I need your help with an important task~ Find the bandits that are hiding!!"

"So you have been patrolling."

"Yes. Both the merchants and the citizens are troubled by this; it's a pain for the soldiers too. Can you think of a way to resolve this? Regis, you are a tactician right?"

"No... I am not a tactician..."

"You can't do it?"

"I mean I am not a tactician, but I do have a plan... What are the manpower and time frame available?"

Altina poked her index finger together, fidgeting and said:

"For the time frame, as soon as possible... The bandits started being rampant half a year ago, but they didn't stir up too much trouble so there was no rush. The problem is the available troops."

"Only a small part is available?"

"Will it be okay if it is just me?"

"Huh? What are you saying...?"

"I am confident in my swordsmanship."

"I know you are strong, but there are a lot of bandits. If you manage to nab a couple, the rest would have fled."

"Ugugu... You are right."

"Do you want to catch them all yourself?"

"No... It's just that very few soldiers will listen to my command."

She said something that couldn’t be ignored.

"Why is that so?"

"Erm... I told you Jerome dislikes me right?"

Altina’s face had a troubled expression just like a 14 year old.

The accomplished original commander disliked the new commander's orders, so very few soldiers would follow the new commander.

"What a surprise. I met knight commander Evrard and his men; they seem to adore you right? They even claim that you are a goddess."

Regis remembered. The group in the courtyard felt dangerous.

Altina blushed.

"It is embarrassing to be called a goddess... Some people are willing to listen to me. I am grateful for that."

"How many? What about the rest?"

"Normal situations aside, they will only follow Jerome's command on the battlefield."

"... Well, a famed general is more trustworthy than a goddess when your life is on the line."

"That's right."

There were soldiers who liked Altina, but they were just treating her like a princess. Altina had yet to earn their trust as a commander.

This was normal since she had no accomplishments yet.

"I recall that Beilschmidt border regiment has 500 cavalry, 500 artillery soldiers and 2000 troopers."

"That's... you really did your homework."

"How many of them are willing to listen to your command? I only need 300 men to execute my plan and achieve some results."

"About 300...?"

Altina replied in an apologetic tone.

Regis lifted his arms and leaned back, pushing down on his seat.

"...Didn't you say 'this is my border regiment'?"

Regis asked timidly.

Her eyes were tearing.

"That is... Although it feels like an empty title now... But I will achieve something one day."

"You just need titles and remuneration to gather soldiers. But popularity will only come when you display your capabilities."

"When I display my capability..."

Altina repeated the words like a student digesting the teaching of her instructor.

Feeling uneasy, Regis continued.

"I am not sure about swordsmanship, but I know your skills are great. But it's useless if the people you are competing with are better than you. A commander needs more than combat prowess... But strength is a simple way to show that you are better than everyone."

"That means Jerome is better compared to me?"

"Definitely, he is the 'hero of Erstein'."

"Hero?"

Altina tilted her head in amazement.

But the one who was surprised was Regis.

"You didn't know? Jerome was a famous general grade officer during our war with the neighboring countries."

"Really?"

"I didn't see it myself—"

Clarisse placed the teacup before Regis to hurry him.

Regis drunk the fragrant tea as he told her the history of Jerome.

"Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt was the eldest son of a knight."

He won his first victory at 14, supplementing his aristocratic life. He followed up with a string of battle honors.

Among these honors, the one worth mentioning would be the battle of Erstein with the neighboring country of the Germania federation.

4 years ago—

To fend off the Germania army of 20,000 men that crossed the border, the empire sent 30,000 soldiers to intercept them. The place of the battle was the plain of Erstein.

The Germania federation was an alliance of several smaller nations under the lead of Prussia kingdom, constantly fighting civil wars and

invading others. The member nations were impoverished, but their soldiers were veterans and well equipped.

The vanguard of the enemy was 3000 heavy cavalry.

Wearing yellow armor signifying honor, they formed ranks like a spear and charged.

The Bulgarian army was intimidated by their show of strength. The enemy aimed for the gap between the armies of two aristocrats, it turned into a scene of the nobles scrambling to get out of the way—the empire's formation was dissolving like yogurt.

If the enemy broke through the formation, the command headquarters would be exposed.

The main forces would also face the danger of being attacked from other sides. If that happened, the soldiers would lose their leaders and rout. The Bulgarian army was on the brink of defeat.

At this time, a unit advanced towards the charging enemy from the front.

Jerome commanded 500 cavalry with his hand gestures.

And the one leading the charge was the black knight himself.

The people were wondering if he was buying time for the headquarters to retreat by sacrificing himself honorably... But that was not the case.

The black knight Jerome took down the opposing heavy cavalry one after the other.

With their fierce leader leading the black cavalry, they shattered the enemy’s formation and charged in.

The Germania federation army pulled in the units on its flank to

defend, but they couldn’t make it fast enough to stop the cavalry charge.

"— And so, Sir Jerome ravaged the enemy’s command unit, leading the Bulgarian army to victory as the 'hero of Erstein'. As commendation for his actions, he was promoted from first grade combat officer to brigadier general. That was when he was 20 years old."

"He was such a powerful knight?! It's hard to imagine..."

Altina frowned with a puzzled expression.

Clarisse said expressionlessly.

"Right now, he doesn't seem like such a person."

Regis commented.

"Is that so? What kind of impression does he give off in the fortress? I have never seen him before, but he is quite popular among the noble ladies as an elegant and handsome type."

Clarisse was quiet.

Altina groaned.

"Hmm~~ Maybe it's better for you to see for yourself."

"Ugh, he doesn't seem to be doing well... His life is not that great after he became general."

"Something happened?"

"Those who were promoted because of ability were ostracised by the jealous people in power. Those so called heroes were wary of Jerome who was made a general in less than half a year. He was awarded the nobility title of Margrave and this Northern Territory...

But was driven out of his homeland in the empire."

On the surface, his 'reward' included renaming the territory after Jerome's family name Beilschmidt — but it was actually just a means to ostracise him.

After this, the name of the hero Jerome faded into the background.

Altina finished her slightly cold tea.

"I see... This happens quite often..."

Maybe she saw some similarity with her own circumstances. Altina was deep in thought moving her finger along the top edge of the cup.

"... You really didn't know?"

"Yeah. He is probably strong as I thought. Evrard and the others didn't tell me about Sir Jerome either."

Clarisse said calmly.

"... Because everyone in the fortress is concerned with the princess, so they will avoid saying things that might upset you."

"Ara, is everyone that worried about me? My relationship with Jerome is not that good, but just telling me his story wouldn't upset me."

"You might not be aware princess... But the soldiers think of you as an important guest."

"That's mean, Clarisse. No matter what, they won't be that distant.... Probably."

"Really? What Mr Regis just said... I heard it from the soldiers before."

"What did you say?"

Altina was surprised by the explosive content that was delivered calmly by Clarisse.

The maid smiled and continued.

"I am an easy to approach person after all."

"What, that means I am an unapproachable person?"

"How could that be. The princess is the princess. Not anything else."

"Well... You are right but... Ugugu."

"Please relax. Even if the soldiers in the fortress ostracise you, I will always be at your side. I am your only companion, my princess. The princess belongs only to me... Fufufu~"

Clarisse consoled the princess as if she was chanting a magic spell.

Although some of the content seemed inappropriate.

But going by her nature, she was probably joking.

Regis continued the topic.

"Well, that's all I know about Sir Jerome. It is normal for the soldiers in the fortress to trust him more than the princess. He was not supposed to command a border regiment, but a division or an army."

"Ugh... I get it. I don't think I have gained more trust than him among the troops. But it won't be long till I change that!"

"That's a great line to say when conceding. Although those saying it in the books I read are the minor characters..."

Altina glared at him unhappily.

"That's it for the issue of command authority. Now, think of a way to handle the bandits."

"Erm... I need a certain number of soldiers to nab the bandits. If possible, I would prefer troopers over cavalry. Hence... I need Jerome to give the go ahead."

Regis' sight fell on the table.

Be it chasing out the admin officers or his relations with Altina, Jerome was definitely hard to get along with.

To be honest, Regis felt depressed.

Altina stood up spiritedly.

"Now is a good chance! Let's try talking properly with Sir Jerome. He is definitely troubled by the bandits too."

"You sure are enthusiastic."

"Of course! It's better than being down all the time."

She said with a smile.

Altina pulled Regis along and headed for Jerome's chamber from the officers' dining hall in the central tower.

Clarisse stayed behind to do her other chores.

With their footsteps echoing along the corridor, Altina happily chatted with Regis.

"You are really popular."

"Popular with whom?"

"Clarisse. You didn't notice?"

"Are you misunderstanding something? She keeps toying with me though."

"People will only joke around with others they get along with. This is proof of you making her happy. Clarisse is normally silent and stays in her room all the time."

"Silent?! Stays in all the time?!"

"Yes. Emotionless, just like a doll."

"... Is the one speaking with me a different maid with the same name? Or is she messing with you too? I can't trust things anymore."

"Ahaha!"

Altina laughed like a child as she ascended the spiral stairway.

They were heading towards Jerome's chamber on the third floor.

They tried knocking on the plain wooden door several times — but there was no answer.

Altina pouted.

"That man seems to be out."

"As the de facto commander, he is probably busy."

"Hmm~ I don't think he is that passionate about work... Forget it. I will show you around the fortress as we look for Jerome!"

"That will be a big help."

"This way Regis! Hurry up!"

Altina rushed him.

They climbed the stairs again to the very top of the tower.

Regis breathing turned ragged.

The top floor was a conference room with a black table.

Be it the map of the border region pasted on the wall, the empire's flag or the bare stone floor... This room gave off the atmosphere of war.

The wear and tear of the conference table alerted Regis of the fact that here was the most forward of the front lines.

"Over here!"

Altina crossed the room and opened the huge windows.

It opened with a bang.

The wind blowing in through the windows made the flag and map flutter noisily.

Altina let her hair flow with the wind from the window. Her hair basked in the sunlight. Altina pointed into the distance.

"Hey, look!"

"Be careful, I might bump into you and make you fall."

"Yeah yeah..."

Regis headed for the balcony, the wind that carried the aroma of the forest blew through Regis' hair.

The lush scenery took Regis' breath away.

The cloudless blue sky and the snowcapped mountains painted a majestic picture. The sun shone warmly over the entire world.

The sky and the mountains were within his reach, he felt like a bird flying high in the sky.

"Amazing", Regis said under his breath.

Altina who looked satisfied nodded.

"Isn't this great?"

"I finally found a treasure after braving the storm to these far lands. Although I can't keep it in my pocket, it will never disappear from my heart. I can remember that scene of the sky even when I close my eyes right now."

"What is that?"

"Quoted from Frenson's autobiography. He was a very active painter in the empire, but he worked as a delivery worker because his pieces didn't sell when he was young. After experiencing a harsh storm, he was inspired by the beautiful sky at his destination. The doubts in his heart and the fatigue to his body vanished at that moment, and he uttered these words in tears. After that, he focused on painting the sky. Shortly after, the 'Frensons sky' became a highly acclaimed piece."

"I see. That means you can't do a job well if you stay at home all day."

"Eh? No, this is talking about how he was moved by that scene..."

Shifting his gaze nearer, he could see the fortress clearly. This was obvious since this observation post was meant for commanders to grasp the battle situation and make tactical decisions.

Fortress Sierck was built halfway up the mountain.

To the gentle slope to the north were six connected walls, with an observation tower.

In the middle was the central tower for the commander and staff to use. Regis and Altina were on the balcony of the top floor of this building.

Be it the NCO block in the east or the troopers' buildings in the west, they were all rectangular stone buildings.

Most of the soldiers reside in the west, so it occupied a lot of space with 20 connected rectangular buildings.

The courtyard where Regis met Evrard was between the central tower and the eastern block. The north that was closest to the enemy was the main gate and parade square.

It couldn't be seen from this position, but the food warehouse, armory and stables were to the south of the fortress, Altina explained.

Regis set his sights on the construction works of the outer wall. Wooden scaffolds were set up at a part of the outer wall.

"Is restoration work going on over there?"

"Yeah. The Varden republic attacked three months ago; the walls were damaged by their cannon fire. It usually holds up fine, but seems like the opponent used very powerful cannons this time, so the walls were slightly breached."

"Powerful cannons? Please tell me more."

"Erm... I just took on my post back then, so I stayed in my room back then. I was told to not come out. So I didn't see anything."

"But you are the commander..."

"When I get up from my chair, they will say 'princess, please leave this to us' and was escorted back, it can't be helped!"

"Well, I can imagine that. Do the neighboring countries attack frequently?"

"About once every three months. But it is hard to traverse the forest during winter, so they probably won't come this time."

The distance between Varden republic and the empire was just 30 Li (133 km), but there was a forest with barbaric tribes residing between them— Regis had read in a book.

"What about the barbarians?"

"I have not seen them before, but I heard they climbed over the outer wall when they attacked in the summer, it was a fierce battle."

"Ugh..."

When battling the ill-equipped savages, the situation might change abruptly either to their advantage or disadvantage. The empire's cavalry was overwhelmingly superior in the open plains, but there were examples of the barbarians counterattacking them in the forest.

There were cases of barbarians scaling the walls with their bare hands. They were opponents you couldn't take lightly.

Altina turned around.

"That's about it. It's about time we visit the next place."

"Ah, thank you. You showed me a wonderful view."

"That's great. But where has that man gone?"

They didn't find Jerome in the central tower.

After taking a spin at the parade square and the eastern block, Regis and Altina headed for the south of the fortress.

They were going to the stables.

It was a series of small buildings made for the horses. The work horses and war horses numbering 600 were reared inside.

The pungent odor of beasts was strong.

"This surprises me."

"What is it?"

"You are a princess, Altina... But you have no reaction after smelling this."

"Instead of learning music and dance, I prefer fencing and riding classes. So I can take care of horses too."

"That's impressive."

Altina ran to one of the horses.

"Good afternoon! How's your leg? Sorry about yesterday!"

The skinny horse neighed in reply.

It was hard to differentiate them, but it seemed to be the horse that was pulling the wagon yesterday. Its right hind leg was bandaged.

Altina caressed the head of the horse as she fed it some vegetables.

It was a big one. The scene of the horse munching its food was meaninglessly charming.

"Isn't it cute? Do you want to try feeding it?"

"Never mind, it feels like it will bite my hand off as well, so I will pass..."

"Ahaha, this child won't do that. Horses are smart alright?"

"If that's true, I am the type that is disliked by horses. They keep throwing me off their back during riding classes."

"Eh? So you can't ride a horse?"

"That's nothing to be proud of. I have never made a horse run before."

"That is really not something to take pride in."

Altina started to smile.

"Then, let me teach you!"

"I don't want to trouble you."

"Which horse should we choose? One that is small and kind?"

"Hey hey... Don't I have a choice? I have the right to refuse orders that are beyond my capabilities. By the way, hierarchy is meant to be broken..."

Altina went to the back of the stable, ignoring Regis' protest.

They arrived at a place full of horse feed.

Suddenly, a woman appeared from the shadow.

It was someone who didn't fit in a place like a stable. She was not in military or maid attire, but dressed in peasant clothing, with a basket

of apples. She averted her eyes in a panic when she saw Altina.

"Ah, the princess?"

"Hmm? Who are you?"

"I am... That is... Ex, excuse me!"

She fled in a hurry after finishing.

Altina saw her off silently.

"... Who was she? Seems like a civilian from town?"

"Did she come to peddle?"

"She was carrying a basket of apples."

"Ah. It is still daytime... So she was not a courtesan."

Regis had a slip of tongue.

The young girl beside him asked.

"What was that?"

"Eh?"

"What is this courtesan you mentioned?"

He was careless. Altina was still underage.

But not really. She could marry at 15, so it was not surprising for her to know at 14.

But she was a royalty.

She probably doesn’t have any shady friends or adults around her.

Why did it turn out like this! If this goes on, he would become a bad person teaching useless things to a naive young girl— Regis shivered when he thought about that.

Altina pressed him:

"Why are you not saying anything, Regis? Teach me properly."

"Ugugu... That is... That... means female merchants who work at night..."

"Hmm~? Now that you mention it, normal shops only open during daytime."

"That's it."

As Regis was still conversing with Altina—

A man who seemed to have rendezvoused with the female merchant came out from the place the woman appeared from.

He was wearing general grade attire.

Muscles could be seen from the chest that was exposed due to his untidy attire. The man was tall with broad shoulders.

His black hair was combed back and he sported a stubby beard. He was in his mid-20s.

He had light brown skin and sharp eyes.

Although preferences differed from people to people, but Regis had to admit that objectively, he was a handsome man.

But this man had a demeanor of a drunkard.

An apple in his left hand, a beer bottle in his right.

His hiccups smelled of alcohol.

"Eh... I was wondering who it was... So it is the little girl."

"You didn't participate in patrols to buy apples from peddlers? Be more serious about work, Sir Jerome!"

The surprised Regis didn't make a sound.

He pointed at that man with his index finger to confirm:

"You mean this drunkard is Sir Jerome?! He is Margrave Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt?! The hero of Erstein?!"

The man tilted the bottle in his hand and gulped down the amber colored liquid. He then glared at Regis with his sharp and turbid eyes.

"Fuuu~.... And you are?"

"Ah, I am Regis Auric... fifth grade admin officer."

"Go back."

"Alright, I will prepare a transfer order. I just need your signature."

"Regis?!"

"Just joking. My appointment will be under the control of her highness."

Because Jerome was present, Regis changed his way of addressing. Although he had slipped up already just now.

"Don't, don't ever joke about that!"

Altina seemed unexpectedly worried about this.

Regis who had never felt the value of his existence was baffled by Altina's reaction. He concluded that she didn't want the new admin officer to run off.

Also, he was in the midst of helping her tackle the bandit problem.

I see, it's because the job she tasked me with was not complete yet — Regis thought about it that way.

"Well, that's the situation... Regrettably, I can't return to the imperial capital without the princess' permission."

"Hmmp... There is no food for useless admin officers here. Go and eat hay."

"I have questions about this too... Can you tell me why you chased my predecessors away? I don't want to make the same mistake too."

"Don't bother me about what I do. That will be good enough."

"I understand. It seems like your Chamberlain is handling the paperwork right now... Can you leave that to me? It is difficult for one person to handle all the tax and accounting work, so I wish to be of service..."

"Do what you want. I will use the money when I want to in the way I want to."

At this point of the conversation, a disgusting thought rose in Regis' mind.

Or rather, Jerome's action was ordering Regis to 'realise this'.

Altina had a blank expression, unable to understand that.

Regis asked seriously.

"Pardon me... Could it be that the previous admin officer lost his job because the Margrave's usage of the military budget clashed with his opinion?"

"Kukuku... That's it. I used the funds for alcohol and gambling, that fellow kept bothering me about it so I chased him out."

"Oh... This is embezzlement."

Regis looked upwards.

What a bold criminal declaration.

He might even face execution if convicted in military court.

"What's wrong with that? The bastards from the neighboring countries and the savages can't get in if this fortress still stands. The money is given because the fortress is here; it is my freedom to use it as I wish."

He took another swig of beer.

And a bite of the apple.

Altina showed a bewildered face.

"Regis..."

"Yes?"

"Is it true that you can spend the budget freely if you protect the kingdom? Is it true?"

"The answer is definitely no. — The empire's finance ministry sets the military funds at 20% of the total budget. Because the money is collected for the empire's defense, to use it for unnecessary entertainments is noncompliant with standing orders."

"It is obvious when you think about it. You got it wrong, Sir Jerome."

Altina criticised.

But he mockingly smirked and replied:

"Hmmp, an admin officer with a corrupted mindset. Even if you say these on the surface, you all will say the same things."

"May I ask what you mean by that?"

"Kukuku... You are planning to tell me 'give me money and I will close an eye' correct? All you admin officers are the same."

Jerome let out a chilling laugh.

Regis looked up once again.

"Oh... On top of embezzlement, isn't this intimidation, this... is too overboard..."

"Liar! You definitely won't say this Regis, right?"

Altina looked over anxiously.

Good guys were always bullied, although people told Regis before—but he was glad to be a lawful person. Because he could settle this without making her sad.

He told Sir Jerome clearly:

"I am not interested in embezzlement."

"Huh? You don't want money? Kukuku... Stop putting up a front. There are other things that you want right?"

There were things Regis desired.

Of course.

But that had nothing to do with embezzlement.

For a moment the price of the books flashed across his mind, but there were other things too.

"I won't do such despicable things. That is as good as giving up on my life."

"Haha, you won't speak the truth with the little girl present? Relax, she can't do anything."

"Mu..."

Altina pouted, leaving it to Regis to settle this scene.

"I think I created some misunderstanding, Sir Jerome."

"What did you say?"

"... It doesn't matter who is here. If you ask me why, it is because everyone must decide the way to live his own life."

"Haha, are you mimicking a priest?"

"No, this is a social gain and loss issue— if someone did bad things, others will need to bear the hardship. It creates a deep sense of guilt. Those who gain through illicit means can't escape from this sense of guilt. No matter how well off your life may be, your heart will remain gloomy. That is such a tragic life..."

Jerome was silent.

Altina was listening seriously.

Regis carried on:

"— those who gain through legal means can enjoy the fruits of their labor even if it is meager. But those who did bad things will carry this sense of guilt no matter how extravagant their lifestyles are. I want

to ask Sir Jerome, who listened to me patiently which side do you think will obtain true happiness?"

"..."

Jerome grounded his teeth loudly.

His gaze pierced at Regis like a lance.

This gaze reminded others of a mythical creature that could turn man into stone with just a look.

As if Regis heart had stopped beating. He resisted the urge to flee and stood his ground.

Altina openly glared back at Jerome.

"Sir Jerome, can't you answer?"

"Tch... This dull lecture makes the beer taste bland."

He threw the bottle aside.

At the same time, he reached for the pitchfork stuck in the hay. It was a fork-like farm tool the size of a lance meant for conveying horse hay.

The pitchfork was like a three-pronged spear in Jerome's hands.

After a sudden sound of the wind—

The apple in the air was pierced before Regis' eyes.

The sharp metal tips were extended towards Regis' nose.

"Wah!?"

"Kukuku... You said a lot of impressive words, but that's it!"

Regis adopted a defensive stance that didn't help much. The difference in strength was too great. Jerome could kill Regis even without the pitchfork.

His back was drenched in cold sweat.

— Did he misjudge Jerome? Despite Jerome's crude and violent attitude, Regis decided to treat him as someone he could converse with. But that was based on just a few lines. Jerome shouldn't be someone who uses violence meaninglessly. If so, why was he acting this way?

Regis flipped through the books he had read in his mind.

He had some theories, but as he was wondering what to do, Altina moved.

The girl stood before him like a shield. Her left hand knocked away the pitchfork while her right hand rested on her sword hilt.

"Don't take it like a child, Jerome! Seriously using violence because you lost the argument."

"You think I lost?! Are you treating me like a loser?!"

Jerome spun the pitchfork.

The sound of wind reverberated in the room.

The sharp end was aimed at Altina's chest.

With a snapping sound, something white flew into the air.

That was one of Altina's decorative buttons.

Altina frowned.

"Mu..."

"Kukuku... Is that it little girl... You would be dead if this was a battlefield.

"If you had killing intent, then certainly."

"... Huuu.""

The two stared at each other, unmoving the entire time.

"Are you trying to intimidate me with such tricks?"

"Hmmp... What a noisy wench."

Although Jerome was intimidating Altina, he did not hurt her.

Regis observed quietly.

— He is not a man who will hurt a little girl because of heightened emotions. If he had such a character, they would have already gone at each other. He might be waving his pitchfork violently, but he is still talking to us with a level head.

If he was concerned about his reputation, Jerome would have tried to hide the fact he was skipping work and drinking on the job. If he was corrupt, he would have covered up the embezzlement.

But he did neither.

Doesn't he care about anything at all? This might be true given Jerome's circumstances... But if he really doesn't think it matters, he would have already ended this conversation.

There must be a reason he was listening to what he described as noise.

"Are you testing me?"

"Tch!"

Jerome squinted his eyes.

Regis formulated his plan.

Instead of finding out the Margrave's real motive, settling the original objective was the priority. They had found a den in the bushes, but they were not ready to chase the snake out of it yet.

He steadied his heartbeat and breathing.

"Your royal highness... I am finished with my questions. I understand why this fortress has no need for admin officers."

"I see. I didn't come here to make enemies."

Altina nodded.

Jerome looks surprised.

"Is there something else? You want to order me to do something?"

"It's about the bandits. I think the current way of dealing with them is not working. We need to find another way. Hence, I want to activate some of the soldiers."

"Another way you say?"

"That's why we are looking for you, Sir Jerome."

"... Ke, it's useless."

"What is useless?"

"I don't know what stories that admin officer told you, but those are only paper theories. I was wondering what you are up to, so you

want to nab the bandits! Leave them be! The merchants aren't losing much!"

"What are you saying? Protecting civilians is the duty of the military!"

"Don't keep harping about those high ideals, little girl. It's impossible for the soldiers in the fortress to be successful. Don't issue orders to torment them!"

Jerome discarded the pitchfork and turned to leave.

Altina took her hand away from the hilt.

She didn't draw her sword the entire time. She might have been intimidated by the opponent and couldn't act... But that was not something Regis could tell through observation.

Altina halted Jerome who was leaving.

"Where are you going?"

"To town. I want to play at the casino to refresh myself."

"Is that so... Then command the soldiers to listen to my orders first."

"I refuse. I don't want the troops to waste their efforts."

"It's not a waste of effort!"

"Kuhahaha! It's futile, a waste of time! I bet they definitely can't find the bandits!"

"No, no such thing... I have a tactician here!"

Her expectations were getting heavier. Regis' face looked bitter.

"Hmmp, are you testing this admin officer? Then I definitely can't lend you the troops!"

"Don't decide by yourself, listen to his plan first!"

Jerome would leave for town if Regis stayed silent. If things went bad, it might result in bloodshed.

There's no other way.

To be frank, he disliked playing the role of tactician.

— But it was about time to get to work.

Regis had been quiet so far, but he was participating in the dialogue now.

"Sir Jerome is out of ideas and is just touring the streets at night. But the soldiers have to patrol at night. They are so pitiful."

"What did you say? I am out of ideas? The soldiers are pitiful? You think they are pitiful to be my subordinates? You mock me with your words, moron... Try saying that again, I will snap your flimsy neck."

The horses in the stables were also neighing restlessly.

Jerome had a scary look in his eyes.

His intimidating aura made him look like a different man.

Is this wrath? Killing intent? Or a demonic air?

Anyway, Regis now knew that Jerome was just playing when he twirled the pitchfork around.

Altina restrained the man who was approaching Regis.

"Stop, Sir Jerome!"

"Hmmp! This is the front lines. Two people dying is no big deal."

"If you are serious, I will also..."

Regis scolded himself.

— Don't be intimidated by his aura! Stop shaking!

Even if his swordsmanship was bad, he couldn't ride a horse and was useless in a fight, he couldn't be scared stiff on the spot.

"Sir Jerome... I have countless ways to nab the bandits. Not using these plans and insisting on ineffective patrols, don't you think the soldiers are pitiful?"

"... Hmmp... Kukuku... You claim to have countless methods?"

"That's right."

Jerome drew near briskly. The dangerous air about him vanished instantly— that's what Regis felt but he was grabbed violently the next moment.

"You imbecile! Do you dare to bet your life on it since you are sure it will work?"

Altina stepped between Regis and Jerome and separated them.

"Stop your violent behavior!"

"Hmmp!"

"Cough cough..."

Altina checked on Regis.

"Are you okay?"

"... I don't think I am a tactician that meets your expectations. But

there is no problem for this issue. I can already see the ending."

The soldiers were gathered in the parade square on Jerome's order.

600 troops have been gathered for now.

Regis stood before the soldiers with Altina and Jerome beside him.

"Hmmp... Will these numbers be enough? There are no cavalry, only foot soldiers here."

"Yes, the mission does not require cavalry... But to muster the troops with a single command... I have never seen such discipline, training and strength of command in all the units I have served in."

"Stop with the useless flattering, you are taking this too casually. That's why the admin offices are unpopular."

"Is, is that so?"

The compliments were his heartfelt words.

Jerome was a general grade officer who drinked during the day and let his troops patrol without a plan. Regis was worried about Jerome's standing with the soldiers, but it seemed that it was unnecessary.

Was it his fame from his past heroic actions or his powerful combat skills? From the way he cared about his soldiers, Jerome maintained his outstanding command abilities.

Altina mumbled softly.

"Isn't it because Jerome will do terrible things if they don't listen to him?"

"Haha..."

That is like taming animals — Regis thought, but he didn't reply.

The terrifying Jerome glared at them.

"Hey, you understand? You will lose your life if you screw this up. I will assign you to the very front rank during the next barbarians' attack. That is a position of glory, so sacrifice yourself gloriously."

The vanguard of the assault group belonged to those who were confident in their combat skills.

The strongest fighters will clash at the very beginning.

Weak people like Regis might not be able to keep up with the assault team's speed, fall down and get trampled to death.

"How scary... By the way, what if it works?"

"Kukuku... How daring. I will acknowledge you if you succeed and let you live."

"What a charming reward."

And so— Regis started briefing the battle plan to the soldiers.

It was an easy to understand plan.

Regis thought a plan too complicated would fail before it was executed. With such a big group participating, simple was best.

The briefing was over.

They should be able to understand.

But the soldiers looked troubled after comprehending the plan.

"So the plan is... For us to mimic the caravans?"

"Yes. To be precise, it is to disguise ourselves to be like the caravans, not mimicking them."

"We have never heard of such a plan before!"

"Let's hope the bandits haven't heard of it either. Please pull the wagons and carriages and walk on the road with the work horses. Please don't equip heavy armor, just put on light arms that can be concealed under your clothes. It is a disadvantage during battle. But it shouldn't be an issue if the opponents are bandits— you guys can beat them right?"

Jerome replied loudly to Regis' query.

"Definitely! Armors are just for show. I won't let you guys off even if you have to fight bare handed. If anyone even mentions the possibility of losing, I will wring his neck and send him home in a coffin. Come forward if you want to try!"

"Yes sir! We will definitely win sir!!"

The soldiers answered affirmatively in unison.

A voice that felt reliable.

Regis had never felt such an atmosphere during his time with Marquis Tennessee’s unit. The soldiers spent their time guarding the imperial capital or the residence of the aristocrats, giving off an elegant appearance.

It seemed that most of them were hired by other nobles after the Marquis' death.

Are they working hard at their new assignments?

Regis thoughts were drifting towards home, so he shook his head and focused on the task at hand.

He needed to brief them the detailed instructions.

"The point is making everyone look like normal caravans. We need to ferry wooden crates for the illusion of ferrying valuable merchandise. The speed of the horse will give things away if the cargo is too light, so please stuff something in, even rocks are fine too. Leave the weapons in the luggage compartment."

There were some soldiers who placed emphasis on their reputation. The knights who were aristocrats were not present, but there were still all sorts of people among the troopers.

"Unacceptable! Isn't that asking us to act like transport workers! How can we regular soldiers bearing the glory of the empire accept this!?"

"Well... I am not forcing all of you to participate... But compared to soldiers who dress stylishly, I will prefer troopers who bring peace by disguising themselves. Which do you think is shouldering the pride and glory?"

"Ugh... Mu... No but..."

"This is the same concept as hiding and waiting for our chance during ambushes. Having hidden ourselves, would it really be glorious to announce your names loudly instead?"

Jerome responded in place of the silenced soldiers:

"Don't even need to think about it. Any idiot who expose himself during an ambush will be silenced by me. With a lance through his heart!"

"I see, dying without knowing why is glorious."

There were no more protests. If Jerome wanted to do it, the troops didn’t have any option but to follow.

Altina asked:

"And so? What about me?”

"Huh?"

"Disguise as a wagon driver again?

"... Your highness, your hair and eyes are too prominent, so please wait here."

"What? You want me to stay here?!"

"Yes... Ah, no..."

"Which is it?"

"I don't want the bandits to know our change of plans, so please carry on with your patrol, princess."

"Eh... You want me to patrol even though you know it is a waste of effort?"

"Yes. Please consider it as a patrol in order to keep the changes a secret. I also don't want the citizens to think the military is slacking off."

"Ugugu... I understand..."

She understood, but Altina was depressed because her role was not what she expected it to be.

The troops finished their preparation and set off from Century Fortress.

Just like this, several disguised caravans hit the road.

About a week later, their efforts paid off.

Although Jerome was skeptical of the battle plan in the beginning, he unexpectedly disguised himself and joined in.

He probably had his own considerations.

He disguised himself as a transport worker, pushing a cart laden with cargo.

And luckily— or rather unluckily for the other party — the bandits attacked his caravan.

Just as Regis planned.

The bandits looked like mercenaries who had fallen on hard times.

"Kuhaha! Hand over your cargo! I will grant you a quick death if you do as I say!"

The bandits sneered.

A lance was lunged forward.

But the tip was stopped by a man with his fingers. That man looked just like a transport worker.

"Doing as you please in my territory... You damn pests!!"

The bandits stared with their eyes wide.

That transport worker was that 'hero of Erstein', black knight Jerome.

The other workers drew their swords from the luggage compartment.

At the same time, someone screamed in despair.

It was a one sided affair.

It didn't even turn into something that could be described as a fight.

Jerome and his men returned from Tuonvell victoriously to the cheers of the town folks.

That night—

"Kuhaha! I authorise it! Drink to you're full, eat till you are happy!"

Jerome laughed with a bottle in his hand.

The officers holding key appointments were gathered in the officers' dining hall having a toast.

Altina was participating too. But she didn't have any dazzling performance, so she sat at the end of the table. But she was truly happy that the plan worked.

As for the others, knight commander Evrard was present. He was not bothered by his nobility title and helped out actively as a disguised member.

The feast went on.

The strong men laughed, shouted and chatted.

The rank and file soldiers who took part in the plan were probably talking about their brave exploits in the parade square.

As an NCO, Regis should be joining the party at the parade square.

But the plan was proposed by him, so he was invited to the officers' dining hall.

And he was seated at the table belonging to Jerome and the core

battle team. But Regis felt like he was a puppy lost among wolves.

He was feeling uneasy.

Jerome shouted angrily.

"Hey, Regis!!"

"Eh... Asking for me?"

"You are the only Regis in my regiment!"

"Ah, I see... By the way, I am the princess' subordinate in the Orbat..."

Altina who was seated beside him nodded gingerly.

"Annoying, shut up."

"..."

Unreasonable as usual.

"Hey Regis... How did you come up with this plan?"

I will shut up since you told me to, such a childish thought flashed through Regis' mind. But he would really die if he pulled such a joke. He decided to not bet his life on this prank.

"... Because I read about it before in a book."

"Hah... There is a book about searching for bandits?"

"Nope, I haven't seen any reports stating the usage of such methods. Those who write their battle reports and leave it for the future generations will unlikely be the ones who come up with such unorthodox plans. The book that inspired me is about pirates. The pirates disguised their ship to look like a merchant ship, causing

other ships or small ports to let their guard down before they attack. There are countless stories depicting trickery through the use of disguise. They might be a bit dated, but classics are..."

"Be quiet."

"Ugu..."

It has been a while since Regis talked about books and he had droned on unconsciously.

Jerome was deep in thought.

The maid Clarisse laid down a plate full of thick cut meat.

"..."

She was really quiet now and didn't even smile.

The burly men cheered when she put the plate down.

Altina told her "Thank you, Clarisse" and she bowed silently in return before heading back to the kitchen.

Was it another person who looked just like her— Regis was doubting his own eyes.

Jerome took a swig of wine.

"Hmmp... Forget it. I will reward those with merit justly. No matter how much he pisses me off. Or if he is an admin officer."

Regis thought he should be happy.

But he felt as though he was being lectured.

"Hey Regis! You are not just a one trick pony right? If you can't come up with more ideas, you will just be a chicken that can't lay

eggs."

"Ah... You mean plans? Coming up with ideas is very situational..."

"Can a chicken lay eggs when it is snowing?"

"I don't think anyone will kill a chicken that does lay eggs during good weather."

"Kuhaha! I think my head is spinning. Alright, I acknowledge you! You may live."

"Is that so... Thanks."

Jerome didn't bother Regis after that.

Regis couldn't catch the meaning behind his words.

But the officers who had been ignoring his presence so far started talking to Regis with a glass in one hand.

But Altina lost her place in the banquet, making him lose face.

Regis finally returned to his room at dawn.

He took off his clothes and hung it on the back of his chair.

"That was a really long night."

Regis felt that even his hair stunk. The smell probably wouldn't go away without wiping it with a wet cloth.

"Erm~... well... I will wash up after waking up... I can't sleep much anyway."

He mumbled to himself in between yawns and lay on his bed.

Regis closed his eyes.

And someone immediately knocked on his wooden door. It was not very loud.

Who was it?

But he really wanted to sleep.

The door wasn't locked; it would be easier if they were willing to enter by themselves.

To get up and answer the door or continue sleeping. Just as Regis was thinking about this, the knocking started again.

He had no choice.

Regis got up from bed and opened the door before the knocking began for the third time.

A girl with red hair was standing in front of the door.

Regis wondered if he was dreaming.

She was wearing the one piece dress during the celebration banquet, but her armor such as the gauntlets have not been equipped. If she had knocked while wearing her gears, the sound would be very loud.

"... Erm... Evening Regis. Or should I say morning?"

"Altina... Am I dreaming?"

"I don't think so. May I come in...?"

She looked to either side of the corridor.

Regis didn’t know the reason behind her visit, but he had no reason to chase her away. And so, Regis ushered her in.

"What happened? It's late at night. No, I mean morning."

"It's starting to get bright out. We can talk later if you want to sleep... Because it is something important."

"No problem. I was drowsy, but the shock from your visit chased all that away."

"Yeah, it is the usual Regis. Still saying things in a way that seems to make sense in a roundabout manner."

"Did you come to correct my character?"

"That's not it... If you are drunk and sleep talk, I will be troubled."

"I didn't drink much so I'm good. What do you mean by something important?"

"... Regis, do you remember our conversation on that wagon? The things we discussed when we first met."

"Are you coming after me for disrespecting his majesty after all this time?"

"I'm not joking alright."

A few rays of sunlight shone into the room from the windows. The faint morning light reflecting off the girl's crimson eyes showed the girl's serious attitude.

Regis shifted a chair to the side of the bed. There were no chairs for guests here, so he ushered Altina to the chair while he sat on the bed.

"... Is this fine?"

"Thank you."

Considering their social status as princess and commoner, Regis shouldn't be sitting on the bed. But that was not the relationship Altina wanted to build. That's why she didn't even bring a maid along for this visit.

A woman sneaking into a man's room — A common scene in the fictional novels popular within the imperial capital. The scene that follows could only be done after ensuring no one else was around.

Regis looked at Altina seriously.

Altina caressed her face.

"Hmm? What is it Regis? Something on my face?"

"... No, I was thinking about something silly, I am clearing that out of my mind now."

"Well, maybe your guess was correct?"

"What did you say?!"

"Tell me what are you thinking about?"

"No, that... sort of thing... is bad, and... you are underage..."

"It has nothing to do with age. I am serious."

"Ha?!"

"I have decided. No matter how great the obstacle is... Even if I am still lacking, I still want to do it."

"Do, do what?"

Regis' heart was in a mess.

His heart raced.

Altina was puzzled but continued.

"When we were in the immobile wagon, you said — the aristocrats are continuing a meaningless war, wasting the life and resource of the citizens."

"That was close, so I was wrong after all!! Yes you are right!! So it's about politics. I remember everything I said."

"Was anything you said untrue?"

"No."

He finally understood what Altina wanted to discuss with him.

Regis calmed himself, nodded and focused on the discussion.

"Are you still frustrated with the nobles?"

"Definitely. The barbarians will be hesitant to attack this fortress with the hero Jerome at the helm, but the situation in other places are worse. Losing territory through battles, getting it back by campaigns, the victims are ever increasing. Half my classmates in the academy that served in the front lines have been killed in action. Every one of them is great..."

There was certainly something wrong with the direction of the empire.

"... I also do not think the actions of the empire are correct. The royalty and nobles that should be working to make the country better are embroiled in an ugly power struggle."

"Right. I feel better hearing that from a royalty like you..."

"Eh, why is that so?"

"Under the current system, it is difficult for the people's opinion to be reflected on the nation's policy. Some countries seem to use a national voting system to decide the key policies of their country..."

"That's an interesting system... Do you think it will be better for the empire to adopt this system?"

"No, it's still too early. For the citizens who lack crucial knowledge on legal, military and economic matters to have a say, there is a high chance they will lead the nation down the wrong path. You can't do politics in a bar."

"It is unsettling indeed."

"That is why if someone with high status such as a royalty is willing to guide the nation down the right path, the citizens will be grateful."

"Do you really think so?"

"For most people, it is unimaginable for a royalty like you to hold such opinions."

Altina's values felt normal for commoners, but that was rare for a royalty. For those in the upper class, they were usually aloof with a sense of superiority and demanded preferential treatment.

"I was told by my mother how the lives of the citizens are like."

"Imperial concubine Claudette was a commoner. Could she have proposed the improvements within the empire?"

"No, my mother is not someone who will think of that. Whether it is sad things or hardships, she will accept everything without complaints or ambitions. She is a normal person who doesn't move for her own will."

"That is normal indeed..."

The empire was formed because most citizens did not protest about the inequality of the aristocratic system.

Altina seemed moody.

She clenched the hands on her kneecaps tightly.

"I want to change the empire... But if this goes on... It will end without accomplishing anything..."

She squeezed out the name of that man from her mouth.

The second prince Latreille.

"His backing is strong... In the near future, the first prince Auguste will probably be forced to give up his position as the crown prince."

"Yes, if the current development continues."

"And that guy will become the emperor. If that happens, that man will decide my future... That man will make no mistake and give any freedom or power to the royalty. He will definitely marry me off to a big clan in the queen's camp."

"... That would actually happen."

She had already seen her own future.

It was regrettable, but she probably won't have the chance to express her views about the empire's current situation.

"I will live a prison-like life from then on."

Altina gritted her teeth.

She was hoping for the empire to change. But she would be deprived of her freedom if Prince Latreille succeeded the throne.

Regis shook his head.

"I understand how you feel. Because I feel frustrated too... But even so, what can we do? Commoners have a lifestyle of commoners. That is the same for the fourth princess."

"You are correct. Everything has been decided by other people... I can't do anything if I carry on waiting."

"Yeah, it's like that."

"But even so... I wish to change the empire. I won't just wait here to be thrown inside a prison cell."

Regis calmed the spirited Altina.

"Hold on, Altina... Latreille becoming emperor and your future are decided by the powerful current known as the empire. Are you... planning to go against this flow?"

"... If it is necessary."

Her tone was calm but the passion still burned in her heart.

Regis started to tremble.

"That is too thoughtless. Being too agitated will sometimes make your vision narrower... You could lose your life for this."

But Altina's red eyes showed no sign of doubt.

Her expression was telling Regis that she has steeled herself.

"Revolutionising the empire. That is the goal that is supporting my will to live. If I give that up, it will be the same as giving up on my life."

"Ah..."

Regis gasped.

He didn't expect to hear the words he uttered in the past right now.

Why did Altina thought of Regis as a confidant?

He felt that he finally understood.

"I can only implement my feelings through actions."

"Don't decide so hastily, Altina... You have to put more thoughts behind it..."

"I have thought about it aplenty. There are many citizens suffering during this time. There are many things I need to revolutionise the empire, but the most crucial element is time! There is no time for us to waste."

Regis slumped his shoulders.

He knew clearly that he couldn't stop her.

And he felt very sad over this.

"Altina... You are really smart... You can live a happy life if you are a bit dumber. With your beauty and lineage, your spouse will be a man who pours all of his love for you. You can be entertained by wonderful songs, taste amazing wines, immerse in opera, visit the hills in spring, the river in summer, the forest in autumn and stay in the castle in winter. You can accessorise yourself with your favorite jewelries, wear beautiful gowns, and enjoy the life of a noble lady with anything you might want."

"No matter how extravagant my life might be, I can't escape from the guilt of the politics that exploit the citizens."

"Ha... I said something like that too..."

"The doubts in my heart were answered by you."

"I really am... the worst. ‘Knowledge won't bring happiness’ — that's a line from my favorite book."

Regis couldn't do anything but stare at her.

The determination on her face was so beautiful and magnanimous showing the resolve in her heart.

"I need your wisdom if I am to be empress."

Regis forgot to breathe as the figure of the princess with red hair and crimson eyes filled his vision.

These were heavy words for a 14 year old girl.

There were many difficulties waiting for her when she embarks on this path.

She knew about this from the very beginning and still chose to forge ahead.

The founding emperor of Belgaria had built the empire after defeating all the barbaric tribes. Did the people around him felt the same way?

If my hands hold the power to change the world, I would want to fulfill her dreams — Regis thought from the bottom of his heart.

"But... Altina... I don't think I have the talents you are expecting."

"Regis, I heard rumors about you three months ago."

"Rumors? What did they say?"

"A strategist who is an intellectual with great insights."

Who spread these rumors?

Regis felt so embarrassed that he wanted to hide in a hole that instant.

"Rumors are things that get exaggerated over time. They are probably mistaken."

"This weak side of you is fine too. After meeting and talking with you, I am convinced. I don't mean understanding everything about you, but I think you can be trusted. Whether it is your capability, character or values."

"That's too simple..."

"It is not. I even pretended to be a wagon driver to find out your true feelings and that took a lot of effort."

"Oh, that too."

"That is why I have the reason to believe in you. And for people to trust others is not something tedious right?"

"Is that so?"

"That is so!"

"Erm~... But... But..."

Regis didn't know what to say.

The two of them became quiet.

The room was silent.

The silence was broken by the banging sound of the door.

A yell came from outside at the same time.

"Hey! Regis! Are you awake!? I have something to discuss with you!"

"Jerome is looking for me...?!"

"What?!"

Altina's face turned green. She had just made a confession that would affect her own life. All sorts of unease stacked in her heart, there was no way she could calm down immediately.

Regis leaned towards Altina and whispered so his words wouldn't be heard outside.

"...Calm down Altina... Hide for now."

"... Did he hear... what we said?!"

"... He won't knock if he did."

"... Oh."

"Rather than that, it's dangerous for others to know the two of us are alone at this hour."

"...Eh?"

"... Alright, please hide for now."

"... Hide, hide where!? There are no gaps between the shelves or under the bed for me to hide."

"... An, Anywhere is fine."

The loud knocking and yelling sounded again.

"Are you not in!? Hey! I'm coming in okay!?"

"Hyaa~ please wait! Wait. I am changing now and am naked..."

"Hah! It's fine. I am not interested in that skinny body of yours. I'm entering!"

The door opened.

When Jerome entered, Regis was in the bed with everything below his chest under the blanket.

"Ah... sorry... I get shy easily..."

"Hmmp, whatever. Just listen even if you are changing or eating."

"Is that so... Ugu..."

Something was wiggling under the sheets.

Body warmth was transmitted through the thin shirt.

"Hah..."

He could feel the breathing.

Regis was lying in bed covered in cold sweat.

Altina was hiding under the blanket.

Their position keeping them from touching had been changed; Altina was hugging Regis from the left if you were facing the door. Jerome was to the right from her perspective.

She was doing this in order to hide.

Regis' heart was beating like a drum.

Altina's left hand was on Regis' stomach, her right hand under his back. Her head was buried in Regis's flank. She would be discovered if there was a lump, so Regis opened a large book and placed it on his chest.

Although his body position was unnatural—

But Jerome didn't say anything about what's beneath the blanket.

"Listen to me, Regis."

"Alright..."

"I don't like you. I think admin officers are all talk and useless."

"Is that it... Are you sending me back to the imperial capital?"

"You won't do as I say even if I want to."

"Because I am the princess' subordinate... Uguu..."

Altina's fidgeting leg entangled with Regis' leg. He knew she was sticking close in order to hide.

But this was not good for the heart.

The soft sensation of her thigh was transmitted to Regis' thigh. The inside of his legs sticking close to a girl's thigh was a sensation Regis have never experienced before.

Regis' left leg was clamped by Altina's leg.

His heart accelerated like some form of disease. He might die from a heart attack if this went on.

— This is a great cause of death... No no, dying like this is too miserable!

Regis fell into a state of chaos.

Jerome approached.

"Ah wait Margrave... hold on—"

"Listen carefully!"

"Okay."

Bang!! Jerome stomped his right boot onto the chair violently.

"You are trash. But you are a useful trash. And my principle is to use anyone that is useful, even if they are just a speck of dust."

"Ha ha..."

"But anyone not listening to my orders is not my subordinate. You understand?"

"This means you are unhappy that I am not willing to follow the Margrave's order, right."

"Yeah, I am pissed off! I am very unhappy! Just hearing you say that you are the little girl's subordinate makes me mad!"

"Erm... Margrave, you are also the princess' subordinate."

"This is something that I am definitely unable to accept!!"

"I guess so."

"And so, you will seek permission from the little girl to be under my direct command."

"Oh, I get it..."

The Margrave was a man who broke the rules while wearing a military uniform, and was willing to ignore protocols if necessary.

If Jerome becomes Regis' commanding officer, he would be able to order Regis around as he pleased. And Regis' position as Altina's subordinate would remain the same...

But the fact that he was chosen over the princess as the commanding officer was important.

"Kukuku... I want you to work under me, Regis."

"About that..."

The girl under the blanket hugged Regis' flank tightly in protest. Regis knew her feelings — but she would be found out if she kept doing that!!

Regis hit Altina's petite head lightly with the corner of the book from above the blanket.

He probably didn't hurt her.

Altina became quiet.

He hoped this calmed her down.

Jerome spoke frankly, which was rare.

"... As for me... I don't plan to be frozen in the north forever."

It was natural for him to feel rebellious.

But the colossal system known as the empire was not something mortal man could take on.

"Do you have a plan?"

"Of course... No... My plans have nothing to do with you. Don't get cocky, fifth grade admin officer."

"Well, you are right."

"I am saying you can be of use, even though you are just a speck of dust. You should be grateful."

"I will do my job well enough to justify my wages. As for the change in supervising officer, you have to ask the princess..."

"Are you telling me you will choose the princess rather than me?"

"Well... I can't make an immediate decision."

"Alright then, think about it. It is not something you really need to think about."

Jerome moved his feet from the chair and walked towards the door.

Regis asked him seriously:

"If I... refuse that proposition, what will happen?"

"I am a merciful man. I will grant you a painless death."

The one who shivered in response was Altina who was hugging him.

Regis pressed down her head lightly.

"... That is... a generous ending."

Jerome smiled, confident that he won't be rejected and left.

"Fu ha!"

Altina flipped open the blanket and pushed herself up.

It was too hot and her face was red.

"Are you fine?"

"Hah... hah... I'm not fine!"

"You, you are too loud."

"Hmmp."

Altina brought her face close.

She was now riding on top of Regis in bed.

A daring situation.

Isn't she aware of this?

She probably didn't know about a lot of things, so she didn't understand what she was doing.

Regis could feel her weight around his stomach.

It was Regis whose face was turning red from embarrassment.

"Erm, Altina... Please calm down and get off me..."

"You want to work under Jerome?!"

"No way!"

"Didn't he say he will kill you if you refuse?"

"That was just a threat..."

"But... you didn't reject him."

"No, because you are here..."

Jerome might threaten with violence if he was rejected on the spot. Altina who was hiding under the sheets would definitely be discovered then.

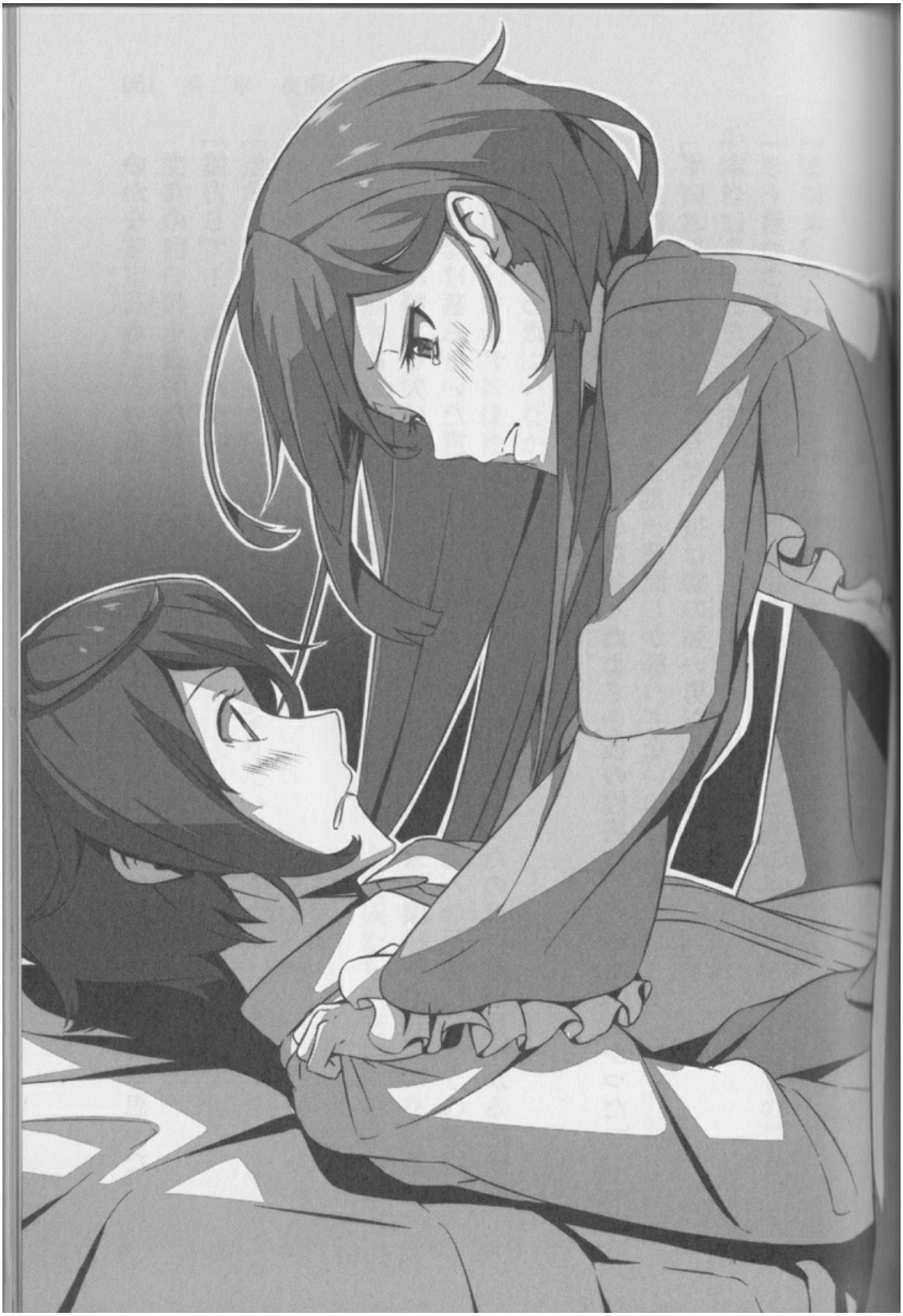
She must have lost her cool to not realise that.

Altina grabbed Regis' shirt tightly.

Her red eyes were getting wet.

She was on the verge of tears.

No amount of jewelry was comparable to this beauty — Regis thought of something inappropriate.



Tears fell down the girl's cheek.

"Help me! You are necessary for me!"

"…?!"

Regis gasped.

Altina was looking at him seriously.

He could feel his face blushing.

Seems like both sides are not calming down — Regis thought as he breathed deeply.

He spoke as calmly as possible.

"Listen to me Altina... I didn't turn down the Margrave outright to avoid the danger of you being discovered."

"Ah... was that it. I'm sorry."

"Also, killing me if I refuse was just an empty threat... I get the gist of his character now."

"But it hasn't even been a week since you came to the fortress?"

"He is a difficult person to deal with. He is a special man after all."

"Really? What about me?"

"... For you... I don't really understand yet."

"What is this... Are you lying?"

"I never lie."

"Well, it seems that you hate lying. Then answer me honestly... Will you be willing to help me about that thing I told you?"

Her face was a mixture of uneasiness and anticipation.

They were so close that they could feel each other's breathing.

So close that Regis could see his own reflection in her crimson eyes.

No one had needed him so much before.

No one had acknowledged him like that ever.

But Regis was still not confident.

"... Then I will tell you what I really think... What you are doing is rebelling against the empire's system. Many of the people in power will treat you like an enemy and attack you. They will even ignore the emperor's wishes and suppress you. Even if you have the succession rights... Leaving the citizens aside, even the major nobles' clan won't support you."

"So you won't help me in such a dangerous thing?"

"It's the opposite. I want to help you because it is a difficult dream to realise."

"Really?!"

The depressed Altina cheered up.

Regis started restraining her.

"Wait a minute. But... but... I can't imagine myself being of use to you."

"Why? Your proposal to Marquis Tennessee, convincing Jerome or nabbing the bandit shows your capabilities right? You have accomplishments from your tactical insights in the past too."

"I did all that because I happened to have the relevant knowledge. I am just an avid reader. I won't be of help in situations I know nothing

of... It is careless of the ambitious you to trust an inept like me. I understand my ability, that’s why I don't want to take on this job. What if I mess up a critical matter? The things you are planning to do are at the risk of your life. There is no second chance. You need to be more critical about your choice of personnel. It was a great thing to have met you. You might meet a real strategist someday... It's just that you happened to meet me in the beginning..."

Altina's shoulders drooped.

Her forehead touched Regis' forehead with a soft thud.

Regis gasped.

Their lips were so close.

"Regis..."

A sound lacking in strength.

Is she stunned from disappointment? That can't be helped.

"Altina...?

"... Do you really want to be my strategist?"

"Strategist aside, I truly wish to aid you... But I cannot guarantee that I will do a good job."

Altina's body warmth was transmitted through their forehead.

He felt that she was warmer than him.

"Well, how about this? For the portions that you can't believe in yourself, I will believe in you in your stead. Combining that will become confidence for one person, right?"

This was a fallacious argument.

But compared to believing in himself, he was more willing to believe in Altina.

"... You believe in me... And I will believe you, wouldn't that do?"

She pushed herself up.

Regis' forehead still had lingering warmth from their touch.

But the only thing that separated was their forehead; Altina's body was still sitting around Regis' stomach region.

"Yeah, I trust me — I want to say that. But I found out that I can't be trusted."

"Why?"

A sudden change in the heart.

She had just announced gallantly that she would become empress.

And there was no sign of her giving up from the looks in her eyes.

He could feel her resolve from her expression.

"Sir Jerome says he wants you to work for him right?"

"Ah..."

That was the only thing that happened after she made that announcement.

She was probably comparing herself with Jerome.

It was true that there was a large gap in their accomplishment.

"Most of the soldiers trust Jerome more than me. But only asking

you to believe in me — That is too arrogant of a thing to ask."

"I think the one closer to success is Sir Jerome. He might rise again and return to the imperial capital."

"Maybe he will become emperor?"

"No..."

It was hard to take over as the emperor.

Jerome might be powerful, but that didn't mean his troops were that skilled. The first army defending the imperial capital was not just a unit filled with the elites of the nation, their equipment was also top notch.

Most importantly, one can't gain the support of the people with victory alone.

It was important to have justice on your side when campaigning for war.

Regis stopped his train of thought.

"No, I can't support him... Even if Jerome becomes the dictator, the war still won't end. Although the territories will grow larger."

Altina agreed.

"Yes. I can't leave this to Sir Jerome. I have to change myself in order to achieve my own aspiration."

"Is that so... there is no way you are giving up..."

Altina responded sharply at Regis' slip of the tongue.

She took his words to heart and asked:

"That is rude! I said those words so nervously I thought my heart will stop! Did you think I said it on a whim and will easily give up!?"

Altina's weight pressed down because she stretched her body.

Towards Regis' stomach.

"Ugh fu!?"

"Apologise~"

Altina swayed as she sat on Regis' abdomen.

Each movement caused pain to his stomach.

The bed was creaking.

"I'm puking, puking, the things I ate at the banquet is coming out... Sorry, I'm really sorry!!"

"Good."

The attack on the stomach stopped.

She breathed out.

"Gaining the trust of everyone is my responsibility. It is enough for me to know how you feel for now."

"I feel like puking..."

"Not that kind of feeling."

"... What do you plan to do?"

"A strategist can't display his skill without troops right?"

"That's normally the case."

"Leave it to me, I will get it done."

"Altina... I am against you doing anything rash."

"Is this your suggestion as a strategist? Or the suggestion of a comrade with similar aspiration? Or as a friend? Ah, or maybe..."

"Erm, well... as a fifth grade admin officer."

"I see."

She reached her hand out and gently squeezed Regis' nose.

"Hmmm?!"

Altina got off Regis when she released his nose.

Leaping off gently like a cat.

Altina was already at the door before his eyes caught up.

"Good night Regis."

Her smile seemed to indicate she was sure of something as she left the room.

The door was closed.

The room was silent.

Regis pushed his upper body up, releasing all his strength and offering his body to his bed.

His body was as heavy as lead.

The chirps of birds could be heard outside the window.

It was not very noisy, but it prevented Regis from catching a wink.

"What is... this..."

Regis grasped the situation of the border regiment through the bandit incident and was sure of one thing. The next pressing matter was the streamlining of the command system. And resolving the complicated relationship between Altina and Jerome took priority.

The best case scenario was Jerome acknowledging Altina as the commander.

If that was too difficult, the next plan would be letting Altina accept her role as a decorative leader.

Regis didn't imagine his words would spur Altina onto the path of kingship.

Altina probably preferred death over being a pretty vase.

And getting expectations from both sides being thrust onto a careless admin officer seemed unfathomable.

With Regis in the middle, Altina and Jerome who was looking down on Regis were in opposing camps.

Regis felt like crying.

"... What is this... could it be I am the culprit who made things worse? How did it turn out this way? I just want to read my books..."

That's right, let's read books.

He was too awake and wouldn't be able to sleep no matter how long he waited.

Regis took a new book from the shelf and flipped it open.

"Reading is good... It allows me to forget about everything..."

It should have made him forget about his troubles.

But he realised his eyes were simply skimming through the text while his mind was somewhere else.

As the culprit, Regis had to take responsibility and repair the relations between Altina and Jerome.

Having a commander in name and a de facto commander was a dangerous sign.

"I already said... I am a useless person..."

With this sad thought, Regis left the book open and slept as if he had fainted.

Chapter 3 - Altina's Resolve

On the day Altina declared she was aiming to be the empress, the situation took an unexpected turn.

The military administrative department had issued an order for the proper archiving and submission of documents.

Regis thought of this as a serious matter that could compromise the very existence of the regiment. But the culprit Jerome was not bothered at all.

"Hmmph... To complain about such trivial matters like documentation errors, why don't they come and defend this fort themselves? There probably isn't anyone who would want to come to the north."

"It is impossible for me to give such a taunting reply..."

"If you don't like it, then do something about it yourself."

"Hah..."

It was dumped onto Regis.

Altina looked worried.

"I knew things can't carry on this way when I arrived here three months ago. I have done everything I can."

"But aren't things still as bad..."

"Ara, didn't I bring you in? I asked the military human resource for you after all."

"I get it now. The human resource wouldn't tell me when I asked them about the place I was transferring to, now I know why."

Regis would definitely be uneasy and anxious if he knew that he was the only admin officer.

Altina asked worriedly:

"Did I trouble you?"

"Nope, being banished was already a foregone conclusion, there are harsher front lines than this out there. Staying here isn't too bad... Although being the only admin officer is a problem."

"I guess it's too much for you to handle alone."

"What choice do we have? Well, we can't just ignore all these issues, I will give it a shot."

And so, Regis started clearing off the administrative works.

He wanted to be of use if Altina wanted to be the empress. Regis also had the aspiration to change the empire.

But the reality was as heavy and cold as snow piled up on the roof. If Regis treated it carelessly, he would be crushed by it.

The work was waiting for him to slowly resolve.

Buried in mountains of documents every day, Regis didn't notice Altina making her resolution.

One week later, in the morning—

Regis had felt the room was too big when he saw it for the first time and was uneasy, suspecting that something was off. But the room was now full of papers, leaving no space for him to walk.

Even the desk that was too big for his grade had turned narrow with the piles of documents.

Regis scanned through the report in his hand.

"... I see. So that is the reason."

There were still problematic areas, but Regis was getting the hang of it.

He was one step closer to finishing the inspection of the documents.

The candles flickered in the wind, the shadows of the objects it illuminated danced on the walls.

Although oil lamps were mainstream in the empire, it was difficult to transport as it was a liquid. So candles were used more often near the borders.

Regis reached for the next document.

At that moment there was a soft knock on the door.

"Hmm? Ah, who is it? The door is not locked..."

"Good morning Mr. Regis."

A woman with black hair entered. Her skin was brown as if it was tanned and her eyes black. She was wearing black maid attire and was slightly older than Regis.

She bowed politely and entered the room.

Regis greeted her in response.

"Ah Miss Elin. You are early today."

"They are setting up a market on the streets this morning, so I was planning to drop by and say hi. I was worried that Mr. Regis is still asleep, but you are already up."

"No... That's not it..."

He had taken a short nap, but he was basically up all night. That was how he had spent the entire week.

Elin was a maid working in Jerome's residence.

After all the admin officers were chased out of the fortress, the manager of the Margrave's residence had been ordered to handle the regiment's documents.

Elin was from a foreign nation, but she was passionate about studying and learned the Belgarian language after arriving in the Margrave's residence, now she could read and write in Belgarian.

There was one more person —

A youth dressed like a butler entered. He had black eyes and brown skin just like Elin.

He was carrying a large wooden crate in his hands.

"Hey, I'm bringing it in."

He threw it onto the bed casually and dusted off the wooden splinters on his clothes.

Elin knocked the youth's head with her knuckles.

"Hey Gösta! Mind your manners!"

"That hurts~... Don't hit me big sis... This is the job of soldiers after

all right? Why do we have to help?! This guy is also a commoner, and is just a fifth grade admin officer, not a big deal — it hurts~!?"

He was hit again.

"What are you saying, if you treat others impolitely, Master Jerome's character will be suspected!? — I am sorry Mr. Regis, please don't get angry. My brother is a newly minted butler."

"I am fine with it..."

"Big sis, I am already 16! I am also the chamberlain's assistant! I am not a new—"

"You be quiet!"

Gösta who was dressed like a butler was maid Elin's brother, currently the assistant of the chamberlain.

As the work of the chamberlain involved all sorts of issues, he seldom had the chance to leave the house. And so liaising with Regis became one of Gösta's task. But Regis still didn't know why Elin always tagged along.

Regis browsed through the documents Gösta brought over.

"Gösta is right... I am not Miss Elin's employer or your guest." Regis said as he confirmed the number of documents.

"Please don't say that. Just your job as a soldier is a great honor. Aren't you protecting our way of life?"

"Big sis, this guy is an admin officer so he has never been deployed."

"Stop that, you!"

"Haha... That's right. As a soldier, I am unskilled with the sword and

the lance."

Regis was bad in handling compliments.

But Elin looked at him with passionate eyes.

"You are too modest, Mr. Regis... I think an intelligent man like you is wonderful."

This was an era which required physical powers in order to survive. Most women judge men according to their muscles, so was Elin slightly different? Or was praising people part of the job description?

Probably the latter — Regis felt.

Misunderstanding things because of some word of praise is too embarrassing. Focus on work and don't think of needless stuff, Regis thought as he arranged the documents.

"Okay~... there are no problems with the number of pages. I will verify the contents later, thank you. The correspondence regarding the improved format for future paperwork is here. I have included it in this letter, please deliver this to Mr. McClane."

"We will."

Elin accepted the letter politely. Gösta who was complaining that it was a hassle was punched by Elin.

It was impossible for Regis to complete all the administrative work for the regiment by himself, so the Margrave's house was continuing to help with the paperwork. The chamberlain McClane was a veteran in the field of taxation and trading documentation. There were no errors on those parts, which was a big help.

The military action report and the supply requisition forms had formats unique to the military, so McClane had a hard time with them and was reprimanded by the military administration department...

Regis checked through those documents before submission and corrected all the mistakes and handled the difficult parts. After much work, they finally put most of the papers in order.

"I would like Mr. McClane to handle these documents for this week. The numbers and things to write are a bit much."

Regis placed the documents he was entrusting to McClane into the crates.

"This much? That is troubling. Mr. McClane has work to do in the house too!?"

"I am really grateful. This is for Sir Jerome's sake, so please lend me a hand."

"Hmmp! There's no need for you to say that!"

Gösta lifted the crate as he spoke.

The crate full of papers should be very heavy, but Gösta had a strength that was disproportionate with his skinny built. As expected of a butler.

Regis extinguished the candles on his desk and walked carefully to the door and opened it, taking care not to disturb the mountain of papers on his bed.

"... I will see you off to the carriage. I have some chores to run outside anyway."

Gösta didn't reply, but Elin smiled brightly.

"Thank you Mr. Regis."

"I feel bad that sending off is the only thing I can do for you."

Regis was planning to get some coffee from the dining hall.

Coffee was a common beverage like wine and beer, even commoners could afford them.

Frankly speaking, he needed some sleep more than he needed coffee — But he had to finish some of the documents by today to meet the deadline, so it couldn't be helped.

Because the periodic courier that sent letters and documents to the imperial capital only came by once in a fortnight.

He entered the corridor.

It was dark out here.

There was not much sunlight coming through the windows at that timing.

The stone walls were pitch black. In the homes of nobles in the capital, there would be candlesticks on the wall...

Regis had gotten used to this and walked along the passageway with one hand on the wall.

Their footsteps echoed through the corridor.

"... Is the carriage parked near the south gate?"

"Yes. It will take some effort to obtain permission to open the main gate."

"That's right."

The main gate that controlled the entry and exit of the army required a lot of people to open or close. The south gate at the back of the fortress just needed the two guards on duty to open it.

The south gate was barely big enough for a carriage to pass through, but it was closer if you wanted to go to town.

The Jerome residence was located in Tuonvell.

The flow of people, cargo and information were centered around the streets of the town. It was inconvenient to manage the territory from within the fortress.

Regis and the others met another maid when they exited the central tower and were walking towards the carriage parked in the backyard.

The maid had brown hair and hazel eyes, dressed in a red maid attire.

She was pushing a cart filled with sacks from the food storage.

This maid was Clarisse.

"..."

She bowed expressionlessly to the others. As usual, she didn't smile or talk much when other people were around.

Gösta straightened his back while hugging the crate.

"Ah!? Miss miss, Miss Clarisse!? How how, how are you! Great morning!"

"... Good morning."

"The the, weather is great today!"

Regis and Elin beside them lifted their heads. The eastern skies were brightening up, but it was rather cloudy.

Clarisse simply answered "Yes". She didn't say anything else.

Regis asked Elin softly.

"... I think Gösta is acting weird?"

"... Aha, my brother has a thing for Miss Clarisse."

"... Eh?"

Even though Clarisse was a maid, she was still the handmaid for the princess, so she had an air around her different from other house help. Clarisse was also a beauty, her pretty hair and skin were really charming.

On top of that, she had voluptuous breasts that were obvious even with her apron on.

But she was like a doll when facing Gösta, not changing her expression at all. Her only replies were "yes" and "is that so".

Women who are beautiful but with bad attitudes were evaluated poorly in this era. It takes time, but others would dislike her like they would an untamed horse.

Elin sighed.

"... My brother has unique taste, a weirdo. That worries me."

"... Well, there is a trend that advocates respecting one's personality."

"As for my future husband, I prefer one that is intellectual and gentle, has a stable income and is not in a career where he will risk his life in battle."

"Ugh, I see... Having a stable income and not in danger of dying is a good thing."

Regis nodded.

Elin gazed at Regis, her unwavering eyes filled with passion.

— What's up with her?

Clarisse respectfully lowered her head.

"I still have chores to do, I will take my leave."

"Ah, ahah that's right! Sorry for stalling you!"

"..."

It was regrettable, but there was almost no chance of Clarisse showing respect for Gösta's personality.

After breaking off her conversation with Gösta, Clarisse looked at Regis with a bright smile. She looked like a different person. Her sudden change in personality made others doubt if she was possessed by the fairies.

"Good morning Mr. Regis."

"Eh? Ah, morning."

"Are you planning to go out later?"

"No... I am just seeing them off. I still have some documents to rush through."

"I see. Can I brew some coffee in the dining hall for you?"

"Eh? Well, actually I should be the one requesting this favor from you..."

Regis was at a loss, not knowing how to handle the strangely gentle Clarisse.

"Hmm fu fu, you came at the right time. We just received a fresh order of coffee beans this morning. Allow me to brew some delicious coffee for you."

Clarisse pointed at the sack on her cart.

Regis was happy that Clarisse was willing to brew coffee for him...

But Gösta's glare was poking at him. Even Elin was pouting with a scary expression.

Regis frowned and asked Clarisse in a low voice:

"... Are you playing a prank on me?"

"What are you talking about?"

Clarisse's bright smile didn't change, just like a mask.

Gösta was grinding his teeth loudly. His hand holding the documents was trembling, the crate creaking.

He was definitely unhappy.

Regis broke out in cold sweat.

"... Clarisse, please don't worsen my work environment."

"Ara? I don't get what you mean Mr. Regis?"

"You are definitely doing this on purpose."

"Hufufufu..."

In the end, Gösta ran towards the carriage after spitting out "Don't think that you have won!". Elin was smiling as she bid Regis farewell, but her eyes were not smiling.

The carriage drove off from the south gate.

Regis sent them off out of the fortress as he promised.

"Hah... Clarisse, please don't joke like that. Without their help, the work in processing the documents will be delayed."

"Aren't you charmed by Miss Elin?"

"Hmm? What do you mean? Gösta really likes... well, that's not for me to say."

"... Elin was leering at you all this while."

"Huh?"

"No, it's nothing. Mr. Regis, coffee alone won't fill your stomach. They sent us ham and cheese too. Would you like them for breakfast?"

"Oh, I am really grateful."

"You want to eat."

"Yeah."

"I will need to make three trips between the food warehouse and the dining hall♪"

"I knew it was going to be like this... Really."

After that, Regis and Clarisse ferried food ingredients for several people.

In the residence of aristocrats, there were many maids performing chores for their master.

They made breakfast before dawn, cleaned the house, did laundry and prepared for dinner.

But the chores in the fortress were handled by the soldiers, so there were just a few maids here.

Among them, Clarisse was the handmaid of the princess, so she had more freedom to move around.

When other maids were preparing breakfast for the troops, she was preparing ham for Regis and arranging the cut cheese.

Regis sat at a corner of the officers' dining hall and ate his early breakfast.

"... Am I being a bother?"

"Ara, why do you say that Mr. Regis?"

"Because this is the officers' dining hall... and I am a non commissioned officer."

"It's too late for that. Didn't you use this place several times already. Neither the princess nor the Margrave complained about this. That means no one will be against you eating here."

"That's good... But even so, don't you have other chores to do Miss Clarisse?"

Regis felt apologetic and grateful towards Clarisse for preparing breakfast for him during such a busy morning.

"My real job is taking care of the princess. So I am just helping out when I do other chores."

As the handmaid of the princess, she was closer to a personal assistant than doing odd jobs.

Regis withdrew his sympathy.

He made a sign of the cross over his shoulders and reached for the cheese.

"... There are hardships when you are in such a position too."

"How unexpected. ‘That bitch, what a distinguished position with so much welfare.' Why didn't you spit at me while thinking that?"

"I wasn't thinking about something so mean!? Well... most people will think that way. That's why it's hard to be in an advantageous position. The jealousy of others are horrible."

"..."

Clarisse looked at him.

He was being looked at all morning. Did he have ink on his face?

Regis lowered his head and looked at the food he was holding.

"Hmm? You want to eat the cheese?"

"I will help myself then."

Clarisse took the cheese from Regis, pinched off a small piece and put it in her mouth.

There were still plenty of it left on the plate.

What a strange thing to do, Regis thought as he took the other food.

Both ham and cheese were processed food meant for long term preservation, but the fresh batch was certainly tasty.

The coffee tasted better than he expected.

Clarisse asked:

"Mr. Regis, did it not cross your mind?"

"Hmm? About what?"

The thing he immediately thought of about was Altina.

What could he do to help her become the empress?

She had told Regis who didn't have the confidence to be a strategist “For the portion that you can't believe in yourself, I will believe for you in your stead”. He didn't plan to become a strategist because of these words...

But he was still thinking about what he could do for her.

"Well, just thinking about it is pointless, I don't really get it myself..."

"Do you plan to act?"

"That... I don't plan to end as just words in a dream."

"I understand that you don't have confidence in yourself, but I didn't think you would treat doing something so trivial, as words that are uttered in a dream."

"No, it is a really big thing right? It can change history."

"Is it that big?"

"Definitely. This is big enough to shock the whole nation and be chronicled in thousands of books."

"So it is something amazing."

"Yes, I think that's how big it is."

"Mr. Regis' wedding ceremony..."

"That's right, my... Huh?!"

Regis straightened his back unknowingly.

Clarisse squinted her eyes.

"I'm just asking you 'has it crossed your mind', so what were you talking about?"

"Oh... shit..."

He was careless because Clarisse was trusted by Altina.

He couldn't say anything more, he needed to watch himself.

"Are you not planning to marry, Mr. Regis?"

"That... I... how could I marry."

"You are an adult when you are 15 in the empire. Don't most people marry before they are 20?"

"Indeed, my sister married at 19... Ah, I will be that age soon... That's troubling."

"You have an elder sister?"

"Yeah, she married three years ago, I was living in Luen city. I think she has two kids now."

"You think?"

"I haven't seen my niece yet. My sister got pregnant shortly after marriage and traveling long distance with a young child is dangerous. I could go over to her side too... But I was employed as a staff of a noble back then. It is impossible to apply for extended leave during

apprenticeship."

"The aristocrats travel frequently with their servants. I think you would still have a chance to meet them even with your appointment. Luen city and the imperial capital are not that far apart."

"Ah, that's because... Marquis Thénezay was rather advanced in age, so he wouldn't make unnecessary travels."

"I see."

"But we do write to each other. Ah, I promised I would send a letter when I reached the fortress... this is bad."

"You haven't mailed her? It has been almost a month since you came here, Mr. Regis..."

"It, it has been about half a month... I will mail her today."

"That should be fine. What kind of person is Mr. Regis' sister?"

Regis took a breath and recollected his past.

Regis' sister was said to be a gentle and mature lady when she was quiet. But in the eyes of her brother, she was only quiet when she slept.

"Well, I think she is the type of person to take the initiative herself. Three years ago, my sister and I were still living near the imperial capital."

"Yes, when Mr. Regis was still a student."

"Yeah, my sister was working as a maid commuting from home. One day, a blacksmith from Luen city set up shop at a market nearby to sell his pots and kitchen knifes. My sister married that person."

"A maid from the imperial capital and a blacksmith from Luen... They

don't seem to have much in common."

Clarisse seemed interested in the story.

She was listening quietly and not joking for once.

"My sister was on the way to the market to buy a pair of tailor scissors on the madam's instructions. She met the blacksmith there."

"Even so, the two of them are just a seller and a customer. Isn't that the limit of their relationship?"

"That's the case normally... but my sister proposed to the blacksmith right there."

Clarisse eyes grew wide.

That was really abnormal of Regis' sister.

"That surprised me. The blacksmith must be shocked too... It is common knowledge for the man to propose marriage after several meetings."

"Haha... He was definitely surprised. Even though the women in the empire are more liberal, being proposed in such a way is definitely shocking."

"But he didn't reject her right?"

"He was suspicious of it, wondering if it was a prank or a scam in the beginning..."

"That is natural."

"In order to prove her identity, my sister brought the blacksmith back to the noble's residence. The madam must have been shocked too."

She sent her house help to purchase tailor scissors, but she brought

a blacksmith back as her husband to be.

"Her actions must be without precedents."

"Yeah, since she doesn't care about others once she sets a goal."

"The two of you are siblings indeed."

"... What do you mean, I have common sense alright? Well, because my sister married off to Luen city, the skilled blacksmith became my brother-in-law. I attended their wedding in Luen city too. My brother-in-law has a large workshop and five apprentices there."

"I see... He is doing quite well."

"The method might be a bit crude, but I don't think anyone will dislike being confessed to."

Clarisse nodded.

And confessed passionately:

"... I like you... Please marry me, Mr. Regis."

"I see now, you are joking. I can tell that without a doubt."

"How mean. I even disregarded the common sense of the world and proposed to you."

"It is definitely weird for the girl to propose."

Regis envied his sister's initiative.

Clarisse smiled and said:

"That depends on the person. I think someone wanting to marry Mr. Regis is the thing that lacks common sense."

"No one wanting to marry me is now a common sense?! I am not very confident with myself, but my assets are not that low..."

"You think you are that bad?"

"... There is still a need to save money for the future."

Regis gave up on this topic with a sigh.

Clarisse took the cheese on the plate.

"Why didn't your sister leave even one-tenth of her enthusiasm to her brother?"

"Even if you tell me that..."

"What do you think about taking the initiative sometimes?"

"I think I am quite enthusiastic about my administrative work."

"The princess is still sleeping, it is about time to wake her."

Clarisse looked at the clock on the wall.

Altina had always been getting up early, finishing breakfast before the dining hall got crowded.

"Waking Altina is your job. Are you planning to let me into the princess' quarters?"

"I am busy handling the chores I forgot about just now."

"You said you are only helping when performing other chores..."

"I understand. I will tell all the officers their breakfast is late because I have to prepare breakfast for Mr. Regis—"

"Was that your plan all along?!"

Regis kept complaining, but he admitted defeat and stood up from his seat.

Clarisse nodded with a satisfied expression.

"The princess needs a kiss from a prince in order to wake up. Do you want to try?"

"You want me to die by capital punishment? And I am a commoner anyway."

"Then please wake her up from outside the door."

"Ah, I was planning to do that."

"Please address her as 'Arurun♪' okay."

"I will be convicted of disrespecting royalty!? Do you have a grudge against me?!"

Regis looked angrily at Clarisse who was enjoying herself, and left from the dining hall.

The third level of the central tower had more windows which were wider than those on the first level.

There was a door that was painted black that has been decorated.

Altina's room was behind this door.

Regis knocked.

Unexpectedly, Altina immediately replied.

"Ah, sorry I overslept. You came at the right time, give me a hand?"

She is asking me to go in?

Regis hesitated.

He had hoped to settle this without entering her room...

Sound travelled easily in the passageway made from stone. Jerome's quarter was at this level too.

Regis wanted to avoid rumors about him visiting the princess' room from spreading, so pondering about entering or staying put here would be a problem.

"... I have no choice."

He mumbled softly to himself and opened the door.

He entered.

There was a huge bed and several chests full of clothes.

Altina who had her back to him was stroking her crimson hair with her right hand.

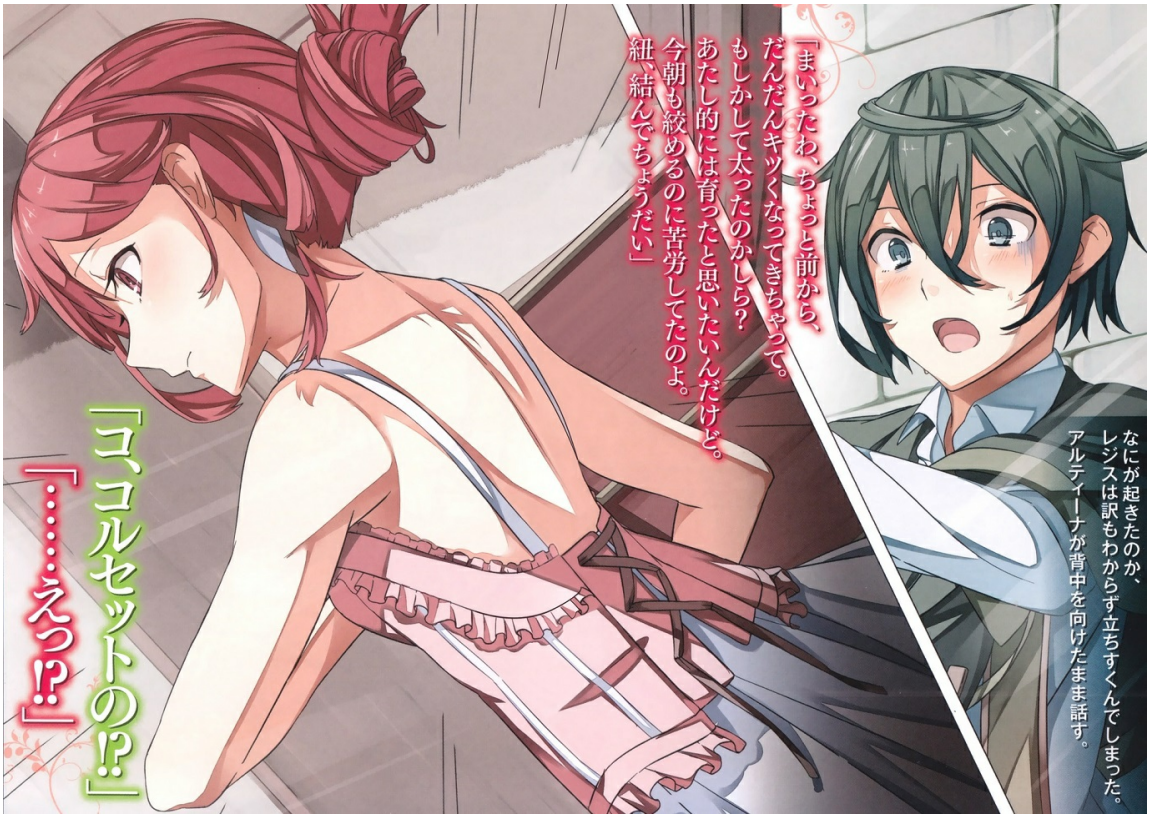
Her skin from her neck and shoulders was showing, her skin was dazzling white.

She was in her underwear.

A corset worn by noble ladies covered the skin from her chest to her waist.

The back of the corset had a shoe like design, needing laces to tighten it up.

While she was preparing to tighten the laces, Altina's left hand was placed at her chest in order to hold the corset up.



"...!?"

Regis didn't understand what was happening before him, standing rooted to the ground.

Altina spoke to Regis with her back to him.

"This is troubling, it is feeling tighter. Am I getting fat? I think I am still growing. It was uncomfortably tight this morning too. Please help me tie the laces."

"The laces on the cor, corset?!"

"... Eh?"

She seemed to finally realise the one who came to wake her up was not a maid.

She turned her head around in a panic with her eyes wide open.

Altina looked as if she was struck by lightning.

Regis was stunned too and couldn't form the words to be said. His mind was flooded with words like outrage of modesty and disrespecting royalty.

"Ah... no, that... I am here to wake you up... I didn't know that this will happen!"

"Hyaaaa~~~!!"

Altina's scream was loud enough to shatter ear drums.

— Is this the end for me?

Regis gave up.

Shortly after, sounds of footsteps drew near.

The sound of men came from outside the door.

"What happened princess!"

"Did a thief slip in?! We will slaughter him your highness!"

Regis could only see his future of being turned into minced meat by the burly guards. Would he be stabbed to death, thrown out like a pebble or burned alive? If possible, he prefered a painless death. It would be great if he didn't drag his sister who was living faraway into this.

Altina said:

"So, sorry. There is a bug crawling out of the chest of clothes! A big one!"

"Okay! We will crush it!"

"No! I am still changing, you will be charged with disrespecting

royalty, outrage of modesty as well as breaking and entering, which will be bad okay?!"

"Changing... Understood! We definitely will not come in!!"

"Yes, please allow us to guard outside!"

"It's fine! I'm okay! I will feel shy if you stand there, so please return to your post now!"

"... Understood."

"She, she is changing right now."

"Let's hurry back."

"Alright."

The sound of slow footsteps became more distant.

Regis' soul turned from shock to despair, adding his confusion of the situation on top of that, his mind was turning numb.

He stared at Altina and asked:

"... Wh, Why?"

"Idiot! Don't look at me!"

"Ah, Sorry."

Regis turned around in panic and was planning to open the door and leave — but there could be sentries outside if he wasn't careful.

Altina mumbled to herself:

"I screamed unintentionally... But in hindsight, it was my fault asking for help without checking who it was."

"I didn't know you were changing."

"That's true... Did you have something for me?"

"I was asked by Miss Clarisse... to wake you up."

"Ku... That girl is really... She knew I always ask her to help me change..."

"Is that so?"

"From time to time. If I am in a hurry or when I'm wearing a corset... ah, it's nothing! These are girl’s secrets!"

"... Ah, you mean getting fat and stuff."

"Should I get the guards?"

"Eh?!"

"Erase it from your memory. Or it is the death penalty!"

"Yes Madam!"

It was not good for Altina to abuse her authority for personal matters, but this was an exception — girl’s secrets are scary.

Altina blushed as she covered her chest and waist with her hands.

"Why are you looking this way!?"

"Ah wah, sorry! We were talking and I just..."

"Did you really enter without noticing!?"

"I swear to God."

"You didn't even attend a single mass after reporting to the fortress!"

"... I did say hello to the priest though."

"Just saying hello and you are already swearing to God? You stay there and turn around. Don't even think of turning your head."

"Alright, I won't turn my head."

Regis focussed on the grains of the wooden door.

He could hear the sound of light breathing and the rustling of clothes behind him.

Fu, fu.

The sound of slightly pained breathing stopped and turned into the sound of clothes being worn.

The sound of metal on metal was mixed in, Altina was probably putting on her armor and shin guards.

"Okay, you can look over here now."

"Fu~"

Regis wiped away his cold sweat.

Altina was in her usual dress with armor.

But the sight of Altina in her dazzling undergarments remained in his mind, making Regis' face hot.

Altina appeared composed, but her ears were still red.

"Fu ah~..."

"What, what is it Altina. Are you okay?"

"Really, it's because you are so dense."

"I didn't mean to look. This is, what is known as an accident."

"I know. If you did that on purpose, I would split you in half with the thundering sword!"

"I think my reason for being slashed by the treasured blade will be the worst of all time. Please spare me."

"Hah... I was planning to talk to you today. But now I feel embarrassed just looking at your face."

"You want to talk to me about embarrassing things?"

"That's not it!"

"Well, it will be for the best for both of us to forgot about this."

"... I think I will never forget about this for the rest of my life."

"... Sorry."

After the blushing receded, Regis and Altina walked towards the dining hall although it was getting a bit late.

Altina went out to recce first, followed by Regis who slipped out of the room.

Just like a couple eloping, Regis thought.

The two of them finally walked on the passageway.

"So, what did you want to talk to me about? You can tell me without looking at my face."

"Erm... They rushed to my aid immediately back then right?"

"Hmmm? Ah, you mean the soldiers?"

"Everyone is treating me well. But they are just thinking of me as a princess."

"I think so too."

"I said that night too, I don't think I am a real commander if I don't have the command authority."

"It's regrettable, but I feel that way too."

She didn't look at him because of embarrassment— that was not the only reason. Her thoughts were forging ahead too.

"If I want to be acknowledged as the commander of this regiment, I need to be more reliable than black knight Jerome. Isn't that right?"

"Ah... Hey, are you planning to do something? I have a bad feeling about this."

Altina did not answer Regis' question.

She was thinking about something.

"You will definitely be against it so I won't say."

"Altina... You are planning to do something I will be against? Please stop."

"But it will definitely be effective. Because you guaranteed it will work."

"Did I say something unnecessary again?"

Altina did not answer, smiling at Regis to reassure him.

Her face wouldn't blush even when they were looking at each other.

They saw Clarisse sitting leisurely when they arrived at the dining hall.

Most of the seats were empty, the dining hall was desolate.

Regis confirmed the time using the clock on the wall.

"It should be... breakfast right now."

If the clock was not malfunctioning, then it was the workers who did not correct it.

All the officers should be gathered here on normal days.

Clarisse got up and bowed.

"Good morning princess."

"Mm, good morning Clarisse. You are really daring."

"I heard a cute scream just now... Did something happen, can you tell me in detail?"

"Ugugu... No, nothing happened."

"Is that so."

Clarisse had the upper hand in the battle of words.

Altina changed the topic and asked:

"Did everyone sleep late? Or are we late?"

"In a way, it is the latter."

"Something happened?"

Clarisse looked troubled momentarily.

It was a subtle change... But it was rare seeing her hesitate in Altina's presence.

"The scouting squad just returned."

"Eh?"

"Is it the northern scouting squad?"

Altina nodded in reply to Regis' query.

"Yeah, for this fortress, the scouting squad would be the one that is doing reconnaissance into the north. Their mission is to investigate the neighboring nations and the barbarians. They spend about one month surveying..."

To the north of the Beilschmidt territory was Varden duchy.

As Varden was part of the Germania federation, it was in a constant state of internal or external war. They had crossed swords with Jerome's regiment a number of times.

Several tribes of barbarians were also congregated in the forest between the two nations.

The smaller tribes numbered in the hundreds while the bigger ones had thousands of people. They were a mixture of aboriginals and citizens abandoned by the empire and federation.

As a border regiment, they had to be cautious of both groups. The commander must be informed of the scouting reports even if he has to put other pressing matters on hold.

Altina bit her lips.

"... Is Sir Jerome receiving this report?"

"Yes, some soldiers came here looking for him to alert Sir Jerome of the scout's return. They went to his quarters after failing to find him here. All the officers are gathered in the parade square to listen to the report."

That soldier didn't look for Altina. They didn't even pretend to have gotten the wrong commander.

A torrent of rage was building up within Altina, but she didn't let it show.

"I will have breakfast later!"

She went to the door after saying that.

Clarisse bowed deeply behind her.

Regis followed after her out of the dining hall hastily and rushed to the parade square.

There were many officers gathered in the parade square before the main gate, and the soldiers were looking from a distance in the outer circle.

In the center of the walls of people were Jerome and five men.

The Margrave stood with his arms crossed, listening to the report.

Kneeling on one knee before him were men dressed like adventurers with cloaks and swords on their back. The five men had unshaven face and were extremely thin. Only their eyes were bright. They were the scouting squad and the one speaking was the scout leader.

Beer and raisins were presented to the scouts, but they didn't reach for them.

They spent a month on enemy grounds for this report, that was how serious they took their one-month mission laden with hardships.

"— that concludes the crucial information of Varden Duchy."

"Hmm... They seem to be mustering troops."

"I think so too."

"Are they planning to attack us... Or are they preparing for civil war... Hmm?"

Jerome looked at Altina who was approaching as the wall of people parted for her.

Regis stopped when he reached the edge of the wall. He wanted to avoid looking like a shameless follower and invite the displeasure of others.

The scouting team looked at Altina with a serious expression. Altina was treated lightly like a decoration and the report began before she arrived. But Altina was still the commander even if she did not perform anything worth mentioning yet. There was a chance of getting on her bad side too.

The squad leader proposed:

"Madam commander... Allow me to report again—"

"It's fine, please carry on with your report. Sir Jerome will organise what you said and report it to me, isn't that right?"

"Haha, me reporting to a little girl? Go back and chew on your turkey ham in the dining hall."

"... I will settle it with you after hearing their report."

Her words were filled with resolve.

Altina's spirit did not waver even in the face of Jerome's intimidation. The atmosphere felt like two swords clashing with sparks flying all over.

The courageous scouts and the crowd gasped at this scene.

Altina urged them to continue with the report.

"Ugh... Next will be the scouting reports on the barbarians in the forest. They were engaged in a massive inter tribal war when we were conducting reconnaissance."

"Infighting between barbarians? Skirmishes between small tribes are common, but massive intertribal wars are rare."

"Yes, a coalition of at least three tribal groups were also present."

"The savages who only know killing and robbing are banding together? Are they really barbarians?"

"From their equipment and fighting style, they should be barbarians. There is a prominent strong man in the group who moved like a monkey. He kept pouncing on the enemy and defeating them, strong enough to change the tide of battle by himself."

"Oh..."

Jerome smiled at the prospect of facing a powerful opponent. That part of his character was probably the reason why he became a hero and why his troops adored him.

Altina listened quietly. If both sides asked all sorts of queries, the report couldn't go on.

Jerome raised several questions about the barbarians, he seemed concerned about the monkey-like enemy.

As the report came to a conclusion, Altina finally asked:

"... The scouting squad has twelve members when you started the mission, right?"

"Yes."

"How did they go?"

"Three died fighting the savages, two contracted and succumbed to illness, one lost his footing traversing the mountains and one was buried in a blizzard."

"I see..."

Altina nodded and closed her eyes.

A moment of silence for the dead.

The officers and men in the parade square quieted down without any prompting, the entire fortress was silent.

She opened her eyes shortly after.

"... Thank you for your crucial report and your gallant service. Please have a good rest for now."

"Yes... Your highness... Ugugu..."

The five men who survived broke down in tears. They remembered their fallen comrades and the hardships they endured.

They saluted and fell out.

The soldiers around them welcomed the scouts with praise and gratitude.

The scouting reports were as valuable as a light shining in the

darkness. The enemy might opt to conserve their strength or attack under the cover of snow fall. The empire would be able to adjust their patrol and defenses in accordance to the enemy's action.

Jerome turned and planed to return to the central tower.

"Hmmp... The most the little girl can do is observe in a moment of silence."

Altina replied: "Stop right there." at the mocking man and placed her hand on her sword hilt.

Regis widened his eyes as he watched the scene unfold.

He heard the sound of metal grinding on metal.

Without giving Regis time to stop her, Altina drew her sword.

"What?!"

Regis screamed in despair.

Rowdy noises erupted around him, the troops were shocked.

The human wall backed away with yells of "Wah!"

Altina was five paces away from Jerome. For a hero like him, Jerome could close this gap in an instant.

Since Altina was pointing her sword at Jerome, it would be no surprise if she were to be killed.

But she remained calm despite that.

"You are adamant to not acknowledge me no matter what happens, Sir Jerome."

"Hey... Little girl, your joke is not funny."

"I am serious. It is a pain to have a royalty acting like a commander for you, isn't it? It is about time to clear this up."

"Hmmp, there is nothing to clear up. This is my regiment."

"These are the words a small nation within the Germania federation will say. Everyone in this army from the soldiers to the knights and even you belongs to the Belgaria empire army, and is under my command."

"Yeah, that's right. But little girl, you can't command troops with just an empty title. This is not the palace. No soldier will listen to the orders of a decoration in a pinch."

"I know this very well. I learned this in April. That is why I need to prove myself to be worthy of the title of commander."

"Kukuku... Didn't you already have the mandate from the emperor?"

"Are you joking?"

Altina averted her eyes slightly.

Regis felt her eyes on him.

He didn't see any doubts or uneasiness on her, she seemed relaxed and confident.

Her sword was unwavering.

She returned her sights onto the man she was facing and announced:

"Sir Jerome, I challenge you to a duel!"

If this is a nightmare, I wish to wake up immediately — Regis prayed.

About one-tenth of the troops were stunned, another tenth were dumbstruck from confusion, most of the soldiers thought it was a joke and some of them were even laughing.

Even Jerome who was the subject did not take it seriously.

"Hey little girl..."

But their laughter stopped with Altina's next words.

"If I win, you will change the way you address me. First, you have to acknowledge me as the commander and listen to my instructions. Next, you will be a general under my command and perform to the best of your abilities. This is not day dreaming or a joke, if you continue to treat this with a playful attitude, I will take it that you are running away."

Altina had laid it all down, so Jerome couldn't continue to brush her off.

The smile disappeared from his face.

The intimidating aura he was releasing increased.

The troops felt fear from the fierce killing intent, some even tried to escape.

"Tch... Don't regret it girl. I won't hold back even if my opponent is the emperor!"

"I guessed as much. If you were someone who respected a person's position, you would be willing to work under me without the need for a duel."

"You are taking it easy. Have you prepared a champion to fight for you? The only knight capable of challenging me in this fortress is probably Evrard..."

The knight commander who became the center of attention had a troubled expression.

He might be serving under Jerome, but he was also treating Altina like his daughter, granddaughter, or even his goddess. He would be in a dilemma if he was tasked with being Altina's champion.

Altina swung her sword.

"I don't need a champion. I am the one who will be dueling with you. I say again — I will treat it as you running away if you don't accept!"

"Kukuku... Alright. You are just a princess who lost in the political power struggle. Might as well end it for you here."

Altina frowned unhappily.

Loser princess was one of the meaner nicknames she had. This was closer to profanity than a nickname.

"You will acknowledge me as the commander if I win?"

"Of course, I will recognize you as a real commander, not just an empty title. That is if you win! So... What do I get if I win? I am the commander of the regiment even without the duel... Ah, returning the title of commander to me sounds good."

"You want me to treat the imperial edict like a piece of trash, right?"

"Can you do it?"

"Even if I submit it up, it will be revoked by prince Latreille."

"Hmmp... So you can't motivate me to take part in the duel."

Altina nodded in agreement.

Seemed like this was part of her plan.

"I knew you would say that. It's meaningless if there is nothing in it for Sir Jerome. I have been thinking about this for the past few days. 'Holding back because there is no point in trying hard'. If the troops think about it this way, then the duel will have no value."

"Hah... You mean you have terms that can entice me?"

"I will resign the empty title of commander, and revitalise your Beilschmidt family name."

"What did you say?"

"You haven't forgotten about being ostracised from the main stage by the generals of noble birth, have you?"

Jerome gritted his teeth.

"Little girl... You have brought up something unnecessary. If you propose some foolish plan, there will be no need for duels. I will shut your mouth right here and now! Think carefully before speaking. What are the terms you are planning to propose?"

It was too late to stop them in the current atmosphere.

Hypothetically, could Regis stop the duel if he intervened now? Impossible.

Doing that would just result in Altina's reputation falling further. A commander who was protected by a mere fifth grade admin officer would be a laughingstock.

All he could do was watch.

Even so, Regis found it hard to suppress his urge to rush in.

There was a way for a lady to treat the imperial edict like trash,

leave the military service and raise Jerome's status amongst the nobles.

"... Stop."

He uttered softly in his throat.

Naturally, his words were consumed by the noise around him, failing to reach her.

Altina pointed her sword at her opponent.

And said to the hero with bloodshot eyes of wild dogs:

"If you win, I will be your wife."

Jerome became stiff.

"... Indeed... This is an attractive term."

"Isn't that right?"

Altina wouldn't be a princess after marrying a noble, so prince Latreille's plan of appointing the princess as the commander would be meaningless.

After the marriage, the nobility title of the Beilschmidt clan would be the same, but their status would definitely be elevated.

Objectively speaking, Jerome had more than enough reason to treat this duel seriously.

"Hmmp... Little girl, you are not my type as a woman, but the terms itself are great. Prepare to be ordered around as much as I wish, just like a servant."

"It seems the terms are acceptable to you."

"Sure. Betting with your life on the line is exciting. I will accept this duel."

Jerome smiled as if he was already victorious.

Altina sheathed her sword.

"Then the duel is on. I will say this just in case. If you have some strange misunderstanding and duel with me with a lusty mind, your rotten head will be smashed all over the floor."

"You should mind your own business little girl. You should start your bridal training now."

"What?!"

Altina grinded her teeth angrily.

It was just a meaningless taunt, but Altina had low resistance towards this type of matter, so it was very effective.

Jerome cracked his knuckles.

"When do you want to do this? I am fine even if we do this right now."

"Are you kidding? I won't give you any chance to find excuses. I have so many demands, I won't request for a duel immediately. There will be tons of excuses like just waking up, you drank too much last night or the difference in preparation between both sides."

"Hmmp..."

Jerome knew the regiment had divided into two camps, one supporting him, the other supporting Altina.

Leaving grounds for excuse would be bad no matter what the result of the duel was.

"Oui, Let's set it at noon three days later. The venue will be this parade square."

"Is three days enough?"

"Who do you think I am?"

"Understood. Also, I don't want others to think I am plotting against you so—"

"Don't get cocky! A 14 year old little girl can't win against me no matter what kind of traps you can set!! I won't find excuses for the results of the duel, If anyone complains about the result, that means he is complaining against me. I will wring his neck and shut him up!"

"... Is that so."

"I should be the one to warn you. I won't hold back no matter who is fighting against me. Prepare your will."

Leaving these words behind, Jerome climbed up the stairs of the central tower.

Groans erupted from a portion of the knights. They were the ones revering Altina as a goddess.

Altina who was revered by them seemed to be at ease.

"I don't plan to kill my subordinates."

"... Are you planning to win?"

Regis asked Altina after Jerome had entered the tower. He would not be harming her reputation by speaking to her at this point.

"Ara Regis, no one will enter a duel with a plan to lose right?"

"Stories of princess entering hopeless duels for love and reputation are unexpectedly common in this world... I didn't think you would be this foolish, princess... I was wrong about you."

Regis felt himself age 10 years.

— To challenge that 'Hero of Erstein' to a duel!!

He felt like he was going to faint.

Altina had a nonchalant expression.

"Saying I am foolish is too mean. Is not knowing such stories so shameful? Stories about duels they can't win..."

"That's not my point! I am saying that challenging the hero Jerome is too foolish!!"

"Because there is no other way. Winning the duel and proving I am the strongest in the fortress. You said you need more than martial prowess to be a commander, but it is easier for others to show who is stronger through might and power."

"I slipped up again..."

Regis massaged his temple with his finger, he would definitely faint from his headache if this carries on.

Did she not understand the situation? Or does she have some scheme in mind?

He could feel she was at ease from her attitude.

"You didn't slip your tongue. I think it was a great idea, Regis."

"... You are planning to win the duel?"

"Definitely!"

Altina answered as she puffed out her chest.

Chapter 4 - The Thundering Sword

The fortress was filled with discussions about the impending duel.

As expected, most people felt that it was impossible for Altina to beat Jerome... So why did the princess make the challenge?

Did she think the Margrave will hold back if his opponent was royalty?

The soldiers shared the rumors they heard.

"Will it be like a festival performance with the Margrave giving up after taking a few hits? Those who assault the royalties will be punished with the death penalty right?"

"You think it will be like that because you didn't see the scene at the parade square. I was almost pissing myself from fear when the general was angered."

"Hey, will the princess be okay?

"The Margrave said that he will take her in as his wife, so he probably won't kill her right?"

"Hehehe... What a roundabout way to propose marriage!"

"Wahahaha!"

If it was a proper duel, Jerome will definitely be victorious. The soldiers were wondering whether the duel is for real or is it a farce. If it is a real duel, then what will Jerome do to the princess?

The issue of the challenge was seen as 'the sheltered princess in the

palace going against the hero'. How will Margrave handle this? Whether the Margrave will marry the princess became the focus of the crowd.

Regis made a tour of the western zone and gathered the rumors that were spreading around.

"... Well, there is definitely nobody who thinks Altina will win."

Most of the soldiers think they are the supporting characters with the Margrave and princess as the main cast. But that was not the case, the soldiers discussing the rumors enthusiastically were more important.

Altina issued the challenge in order to earn the trust of the soldiers. Jerome accepted because the troops were watching.

How did the 3000 soldiers in the regiment feel about this?

That was what Regis was concerned about right now.

It was unintentional, but Regis still thought he should take responsibility for coercing Altina. He wanted to be of help, so he needed to understand the troops' feelings about this.

Regis returned to the central tower after surveying most of the fortress.

He visited Jerome's chambers next.

He felt nervous; his heart was beating at a speed that alarmed him.

He knocked on the door painted black.

"Who is it?"

A low voice replied from behind the door.

Regis gulped.

"... This is Regis. I have something to say to you, Sir Jerome and have come to visit."

"Hmmp... it's definitely about something boring."

"That is probably true..."

"Enter."

Jerome opens the door.

It was a room about the same size as Regis'.

His quarters were next door, there was another door in the depths of the room. A desk was positioned beside the door, the shelves at the corner were filled with books about law and economics.

Jerome was in the middle of the room, holding a short and heavy spear.

He was topless and his body was full of sweat.

The tip of the spear only had a heavy ball shaped item, but Regis was stilled intimidated by Jerome's aura.

"..."

"Kukuku... Are you here to poison me on the little girl's orders?"

"If you are worried about that, you should watch out for Miss Clarisse."

"Ah, that is a scary one. She might really do it... She looks like a nice girl but her personality is terrible. What a waste."

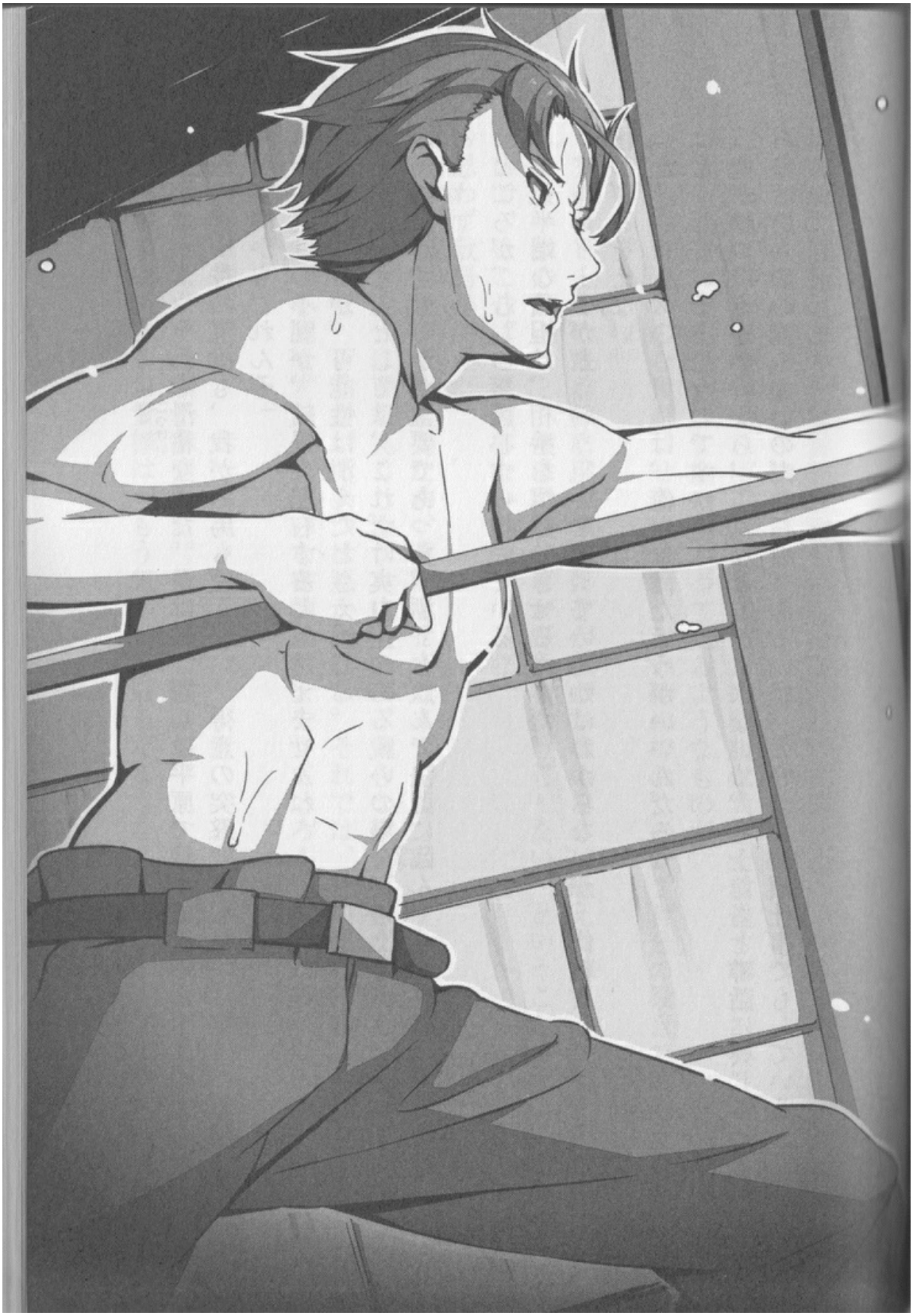
"I want to talk to you about the duel..."

"It's useless to say anything now."

"... You are right."

Regis sighed. If Jerome was unmotivated, there was still some ways he could stop the duel. But Jerome seemed rather hyped about it.

So hyped that he started training for it immediately.



"Fu... I didn't know she would challenge so forthrightly. I thought she would laze around and complain till the day she gets married off to some grand noble, trash that will waste her time everyday... Seems

like I'm wrong."

"If she can live a leisurely life, I will be able to take it easy."

"What's with you boy? You think the little girl can't beat me?"

"Not just me, that's the consensus among all the soldiers. Only the princess herself thinks she has a chance."

Jerome shook his head.

He shook the heavy training lance while holding it horizontally. His arm and chest muscles trembled, shaking his sweat away.

"Fu... That's wrong."

"You mean..."

"I am not looking down at the little girl's strength. It is dumb to underestimate someone who can wield such a massive sword."

"I see."

He is taking it very seriously; Regis thought and sighed in his heart.

Regis couldn't understand the details of martial prowess no matter how much he watched.

The movement of Jerome wielding the training lance was too fast; he had a hard time just catching up with his eyes.

Jerome thrust his lance as he said:

"That sword is problematic... Swords or spears will break if I try to block. I can change a new one on the battlefield, but it will be my loss if my weapon breaks."

"That's true."

"The little girl was probably aiming for this when she said she can win. She will probably be using the Grand Tonerre Quatre."

"I heard that Sir Jerome owns a powerful lance capable of matching that sword?"

"Yeah... But that is meant for horseback usage. It is difficult to wield it for a battle on foot."

"You are not planning to ride your horse?"

"On the parade square? That's laughable. Cavalry should fight on the plains... So she thought about it so deeply. I can't use my powerful lance or trusty stead. And it is not an assault battle I am proficient in. The little girl might even win this."

"I don't think this level of disadvantage can change the outcome."

Not just that. Regis felt Altina's chance of winning was fading.

Regis thought that it was important for Jerome to take it lightly if Altina was to stand a chance with such a large disparity in skills. Such as drinking alcohol before the fight or something similar.

But Jerome was leaving nothing to chance.

Such minor disadvantages will only alert the opponent.

It wasn't clear what Altina's intention was, but this was definitely bad strategically wise.

"Hey Regis... Are you hoping I will lose?"

"Why would you think so?"

"You won't be here if you hope I will win. You will be discussing the rumors happily with the troops. There was nothing to worry about;

you will probably end up doing the administrative work you like."

"I need to correct 2 points."

"What?"

"I hope to resolve this in a peaceful manner."

Altina will be one step closer to realizing her ambition if she won. But she will also be closer to the edge of a dangerous cliff too.

Regis felt that he should help her secure a safety line even though he failed to stop her.

"Kukuku... I don't think there are such things as peace on the front lines."

"Another thing I want to correct... is that I don't particularly like administrative work. Whose fault do you think is my lack of sleep these days!?"

Regis forgot his honorifics unconsciously.

Regis was planning to suppress his emotions, but he slipped and revealed the grudge he was bearing.

Jerome stared with his eyes wide opened and laughs out loud.

"Kuhahaha! Sorry about that! I will amend what I said then -- I will definitely win and you will carry on doing the administrative work you hate! For me!"

"That's too mean."

Regis' shoulders droops.

Jerome changed his tone and lowers his voice.

"Hey Regis... you noticed, haven't you?"

"... Are you talking about the budget?"

Jerome nodded silently.

Regis felt a chill down his neck.

He discovered something after flipping the volumes of documents.

"... The real reason you chased the admin officers away... letting only those who will keep secrets for you handle the account books."

"That's how it is."

"Why do you trust me?"

"Because... I don't need to tell you that."

"When we first met, you tried bribing me, and then threatening with a pitch fork. It's all because of this?"

A part of the Beilschmidt border regiment's budget was not disclosed to the military administration department.

The usage of these funds was not specified.

But if you consider Jerome's circumstances, you can make a good guess.

Jerome smirked.

"Fu... That matter was put on hold since you have been busy with paperwork recently."

"Is this about who my commanding officer is...?"

"You don't need to talk to the little girl about this. After the duel 3

days later, the lousy drama between me and her will be over. And you will work under me."

Regis looked displeased.

"I am not valuable enough for the Margrave to be concerned about me."

"Don't flatter yourself; you are just a complementary prize. Getting rid of the commander with an empty title, the Beilschmidt clan marrying a royalty... And you are complementary apple."

"Hah... So I am an apple."

He might just be a side bet, but Regis felt uneasy being the motivation subject of a fight.

The Margrave was not taking this lightly. He was pumped up for the fight and confident of victory.

He had his own aspirations too.

It took a lot of effort for Regis to hide his worries from his face.

-- This is going to be tough. Altina, why did you issue this challenge?

There were things he needs to do no matter what the result of the duel 3 days later might be.

When the auditors are sent to this unit and saw the state of the account books, the accountants and the commanders will be reprimanded. Even if the commander only had an empty title.

It will increase the chance of the secrets being discovered.

After returning from Jerome's room, Regis finished the rest of the paperwork in a hurry.

He wasted some time because of attacks from the sleep monster, but he managed to finish the documents and sealed them.

Regis exited his room after completing his task.

The sun was high in the sky. It was a cloudy morning, but the weather was good enough to melt the snow. It was warm enough to not wear a coat.

A human wall surrounded the southern gate.

The periodic courier was here.

Most of the people receiving mails happily are knights. Most soldiers were illiterate and seldom send letters.

"The carriage is leaving~~"

A bell was ringed loudly.

Regis rushed out.

"Wait a moment! Please hold on! I will be troubled if this isn't sent out!"

The periodic courier comes once a week.

Regis moved in front of the parcel and hand a parcel to the baffled courier.

"Is that... To be sent to the military administration department? Bro, isn't here a separate courier for military documents?"

"These are urgent documents, it will bad if it is not sent out. It is a heavy responsibility, but I leave it in your hands."

"Hold on! We are civilian couriers, not in the military! You need to dispatch a messenger to deliver something important like this."

"Sir Jerome dislikes dispatching his soldiers to deliver documents, which is troubling for me."

"Hmm, the military administration department is in the capital, I guess I can swing by."

"That's a big help."

Regis gave him a Tonie copper coin as tip.

The courier kept the parcel into his mailbag with a smile.

I will claim the money back as necessary expenses, Regis who was short on money though.

The periodic courier exited the south gate.

He can finally sleep.

Regis yawned widely.

He heard giggling sound near him.

He turned back and saw Clarisse holding a large pile of laundry approached him.

"You seem rather tired."

"Ah... Handling the paperwork is a pain, and things I can't ignore keep popping up."

"Is it about the princess? You don't need to worry about that."

"... Can you make some time for me right now?"

"How strange for you to think I have time."

Clarisse lifts the corners of her lips as she holds a large amount of laundry in her hands.

Clothes were washed with detergent in the imperial capital, but laundry was usually done by using traditional washing boards in the fortress. Detergents are considered a luxury item over here.

"My apologies, you seemed rather busy... But it's rare to see you doing laundry at such a time. That is usually done in the morning."

"Because milk was spilled onto the tablecloth. If I don't wash it now, it will smell later."

"Ah, I see. Did you spill it?"

"No. I happened to be free at the moment. If you don't mind me doing the laundry while we speak, I can listen to what you have to say."

"That will do. Let me carry half of that for you."

Clarisse smiled mischievously when Regis reached out his hands.

"Are you sure?"

"No matter how weak I am, helping a lady carry half her laundry is still manageable."

"That's not what I mean. It is stained with milk alright?"

"Ugh... Can't be helped. I will wipe down with a wet cloth later."

"Fufufu..."

Clarisse handed a slightly wet cloth to Regis. It smelled like milk.

Regis heads towards the laundry room together with Clarisse.

For the house help, the chore that was as tedious and important as cooking and cleaning was laundry.

In a corner of the western region where the soldiers reside, there is a place that was halfway below ground level.

Melted snow flowed into this place through pipes, flooding the 10 washing stations.

Clarisse placed the laundry into the water. She soaked it as much as possible, getting as much filth out as possible.

Her tender and pale hands turned red immediately after dipping in the ice water.

"Ugh..."

"Let me help."

"I'm fine. You want to talk to me about the princess?"

"That's right... But you are doing a tedious task in front of me while I am just talking. That makes me uncomfortable."

"What a strange thing to say. This is what social status means."

"By your logic, helping out with things I want to is my social status. Eh, do I just have to do this?"

Regis took out a tablecloth from the pile of laundry and soaked it in water, imitating Clarisse.

"Wah!?"

His hands felt pain from the freezing water.

"You are really... Take your hands out of the water from time to time when you are washing. You will get frostbites if you soak your hands

in too long."

"Ah, is that so. Are you okay?"

"I am used to it."

"I see."

"When I am washing a lot of laundry in the morning, I will use the pot over there to boil some water. It can be used to warm my hands, and it washes away stains easily."

There was a large pot in the corner of the laundry room.

Regis understood. It was impossible to clean so much laundry without preparing that.

A beginner like him would have a hard time washing just one.

"You are not boiling water today?"

"There are just a few pieces anyway. Is that all you want to talk about?"

"Not yet, I am just starting now... Ku..."

Regis massaged his fingers that felt painful from the cold to warm his hands.

But the stains were not coming off.

So Regis repeats the 3 steps of scrubbing the cloth, taking his hands out and rubbing it for warmth.

"Doing okay?"

"Ugugu... Why did Altina issue a duel at this time?"

"The princess probably didn't think too much about the timing. That was definitely something she thought of in the morning."

"That was too rash."

He finally removes the smell of milk from one piece of table cloth.

A large area on the tablecloth turned slightly yellow, the area that was brown had also turned white.

"But even so, it will be fine if it was the princess' idea."

"I know it is too late for her to give up... But I didn't think you would be so optimistic."

"Don't you trust the princess, Mr. Regis?"

"I don't have the talent to discern someone's martial prowess. But thinking objectively, there is no way Altina can win. If Sir Jerome is someone who will lose to an inexperienced 14 year old girl, he would have died on the battlefield long ago."

"I see, some people will think that way."

"Please enlighten me if you have a different opinion..."

Clarisse picked the tablecloth out of the freezing water.

The sound of the splattering water sounded in the laundry room.

"Because the princess told me 'there is no problem'♪"

"You are just giving up on thinking. What you 'believe in' and the 'facts' are different things."

"So, what do you plan to do?"

"... There are probably no proper measures we can take."

Finishing the cleaning chores he is not familiar with, Regis bid farewell to Clarisse and heads towards his own room.

Are his unsteady footsteps because of the lack of sleep or too many problems stuffed into his mind?

He can hear the sound of sword swinging from the courtyard.

He went over and saw Altina wielding a large fauchard in the courtyard.

Altina swung the fauchard with one hand like a twig, even though you usually need two hands to wield it.

-- Normal girls couldn't do that.

Altina had enormous arm power that doesn't match her appearance.

She probably noticed Regis' presence.

Altina smiled at Regis.

"Ara, you want to swing it too?"

"I don't want to and I can't. I don't want to brag, but..."

"You can't even lift it?"

"I probably can't."

Regis shrugs while Altina smiled awkwardly.

She starts swinging again.

"You are... Amazing."

"Just my arm strength... I am confident of that. I swing swords for

adults when I was very young."

"Well, it's not only that... But to win against Jerome, frankly... I mean... Will that be too difficult?"

"Definitely. If he is someone so easy to defeat, our enemies wouldn't be having such a hard time."

"Do you have a plan in mind? You are confident enough to issue a challenge."

Regis bet on this slim chance.

Altina looks at him with a baffled expression.

"What plan? Isn't a duel won by the stronger person?"

"Ugh... You are really not thinking about anything... There are preparations you can make to increase your chance of winning."

"Hey, I'm not stupid."

"So you gave it some thought!?"

"The lance will be faster in the first strike. After blocking that, I have to watch out for body blows since my sword is heavy. Is kicking his knee cap when he steps over against the rules?"

Regis drooped his head.

"What is this... You are planning to fight him properly..."

"It will be meaningless if I don't do it this way, my objective is not to win."

"Eh?"

"Proving I am stronger is the objective. I won't win over the trust of

the soldiers if I don't win this properly. And also your trust too."

Altina stated calmly.

Regis felt she was right too.

"... But he is not someone you can win without any plan."

"It will be meaningless even if I win with a plan."

"Ugh, erm..."

"Are you thinking about something weird?"

Altina stared at Regis intensely.

Regis averted his eyes.

"... There are many ways to do something without others noticing right? Like reflecting sunlight to his eyes with things like broken glass, or some traps on the ground."

After saying that softly.

The sound of the wind rises.

The halberd smashed next to Regis' foot with a bang. It made a deep chasm in the ground.

"Don't joke with me!"

"Hey, hey Altina!?"

"Ah... Sorry. I was too agitated..."

Me too -- Regis replied to the girl asking for forgiveness:

"My apologies, I didn't mean to upset you."

"Yeah, I understand."

"I understand why you want to have a proper duel. But the goal is not at the end of a series of victories. We need to take the back door sometimes."

As expected, this is too cruel for a 14 year old.

Actually, Altina who was the 4th princess had no chance of inheriting the throne. The only way for her to take over the throne will be by usurping the throne.

But Altina has a pure and just heart, so she won't go through such a path filled with mud and death.

Only a just and clean road was reflected in her eyes.

And so, Regis had to be the bad guy--

Regis clenched his fist.

A pair of white and petite hands was placed on top of his hand at this moment.

"Eh...?"

The fingers that were slightly warm after practicing her swings caressed Regis' skin.

Altina was by his side before he realized.

She lifts her head to look at Regis, her beautiful crimson eyes leaning towards him.

"I know you are worried about me. I also understand that you know about a lot of things."

"Yes, I am worried about you... But I don't know anything great..."

"I don't think it is bad to think about tactics. But sometimes, we have to face the battle straight on."

"... You mean this is such a scenario right now?"

"Yeah, isn't it?"

Regis closed his eyes.

He flipped through the books in his mind and extracts the relevant knowledge.

But he decided against using them in the end.

"If I help you win this duel with a scheme... You will lose the righteousness of the path you are advancing on. There is nothing sadder than losing your way and being a pawn to others."

"Eh... I don't really understand something so deep, but my instinct tells me I should fight and win properly!"

"Should I trust you...?"

"I will prove that I am worthy of your trust, just wait and see!"

Altina bumped her fist against Regis' hand which she is holding.

Regis nods a sign of friendliness since ancient times.

Right now for her, using schemes to win won't be effective and will have negative connotations.

But he can't just stand by and watch idly.

Regis rubs his sleepy eyes when he showed up at the officers dining hall.

But the person he was looking for was not present, so Regis went to the stables.

As he was wandering the stables, the person he was looking for greeted him loudly.

"Oh, Sir Regis!"

"You are here, Mr. Evrard..."

"I was just looking for you!"

"Are you... looking for me regarding the princess?"

"Hmm? You mean the duel? Wahaha! I knew this will happen sooner or later, but I didn't think the little girl will issue the challenge at that time! I was very surprised!"

"You knew it was coming!?"

"She would want to do something to change this awkward status quo."

"Eh..."

"And the only way she can think of is to duke it out with swords!"

Regis hugged his head.

This means Altina's thinking was no different from this muscle bound knight commander.

At least when they are wielding swords.

His head hurts.

No, that was the reason she think it was necessary for Regis to aid

her as a strategist.

"Why did it turn out this way... And the victor has already been determined..."

"Wahaha! Sir Regis, you have a way with words! As expected of a strategist!"

"Wrong. I am no strategist."

"Oh? Didn't you propose an excellent plan to nab the bandits?"

"No, that is just... The princess asking me to explain what I knew... I don't have the capability to come up with battle plans."

"What's bad about that? Using knowledge others don't have is a good way to contribute."

"Hah..."

But what if he lacked the knowledge at critical junctures? That was when they will need a real strategist and his wisdom.

Like the situation now.

Plat! Evrard patted Regis' back strongly. The impact blew his drowsiness away.

"That hurts!?"

"Some people's life was saved thanks to you."

"Ah...?

"My grandchild! That child was in Marquis Thénezay’s army and was saved when they were defeated."

"Well, the headquarters were wiped out after the sneak attack, but

most of our forces escaped. But I don't think it was thanks to me..."

"You mean the people who barely escaped with their life from the attack of the savages?"

"Yes."

"My child was with you in the reserves forces when you were sent to the rear of the main unit."

"Ah, there was reserve force."

"In the end, he was not shamed because of the defeat. He was praised instead for helping his defeated comrades in escaping."

Regis remembers what happened.

That was a grueling memory.

"... After noticing the sneak attack, the headquarters were on fire... So I suggested not to aid them but to prepare to attack... But that was all we could have done."

"Don't be modest. The headquarters were destroyed and the army was routed. The main reason the army wasn't wiped out was because the reserve forces stopped the barbarian's advance on 5th grade admin officer Regis Auric's command."

"I didn't command anything... The reserves have high ranking combat officers leading them, so they were the ones who did the job."

"But that's not what this said."

Evrard handed a letter over.

Regis took the letter.

Edward's grandson used unbelievably formal language and wrote

what Evrard had said.

How he was saved by Regis' effort when Marquis Thénezay's army was routed.

He also mentioned how Regis rescued many other colleagues.

He found out lately that Regis had to take responsibility as the sole survivor from headquarters and was banished to the borders.

And so--

"To repay his debts to Sir Regis, my grandchild will be volunteering to join this regiment. Good! This is also a way of life!"

"How could that be! The survival rate of this regiment is slightly higher than other front lines... But it is still 10 times higher if you stay in the capital. Why would he volunteer to come here?"

"My grandchild is probably thinking about protecting you in this dangerous place."

"... I am not worthy."

"Wahahaha! You say some strange things. Only the person himself will understand why they are willing to risk their life!"

Regis felt Evrard's statement was probably right.

But Regis didn't think he had saved many lives, or that he was worthy of being protected.

"Mr. Evrard, can you accept this? For your cherished grandchild to volunteer to be stationed at this dangerous place?"

"If that's what he wants, I can't do anything about it."

"Am I worthy of his protection!?"

"Hm... I can't really nag about him in my position."

Evrard smiled with satisfaction.

Regis tilted his head, not getting what he meant.

"... You mean?"

"I mean if my grandchild dies needlessly because of your incompetence, I will talk to you about responsibilities with my halberd!"

"Aren't you angry!?"

"Not mad."

"Your sentences are breaking up!"

Regis should be feeling happy that someone from his old unit held gratitude towards him.

Thanks to him, Regis felt that his lifespan is gradually getting shorter.

Back on topic.

"... Let's leave this aside for now... I want to talk about the princess."

"Hmmm?"

"Do you think the princess can win?"

"It would be excellent if she can endure 10 blows, isn't it?"

Evrard judged that Jerome will win within 10 strikes.

That's how wide their gap in martial prowess is.

"... It might go against the knight's chivalry code... But can I ask you to save the princess if she gets in a pinch?"

"Oh? Do tell me the details."

3 days later --

The noon bell was about to ring.

Plenty of soldiers had already gathered on the parade square.

The snow had been falling since the morning; it will turn into a blizzard if the wind picks up.

But neither party plans to postpone the duel because of the bad weather.

Regis is at Altina's chamber.

The accident a few days earlier didn't happen. Altina was waiting for the duel quietly. She wore her arm guard, knee guard and chest armor onto her one piece dress as she sat on an elegantly designed chair.

A tea set was placed on the table.

"You are not looking good, Regis."

"You are to blame if I fall ill from over worrying, Altina."

"You are not the one dueling, so relax a bit alright?"

"Do you think you can win? Against that 'hero of Erstein'?"

"Definitely, I had said this many times. But you all won't believe me if I don't show you."

"And making a bet with terms that are against you..."

Altina stood up.

She was a head shorter than Regis, but her aura made her feel tall enough that you had to look up at her.

"If I am useless in a peaceful place, how can I be an empress?"

"You wouldn't be able to... But there is something known as risk management in this world..."

"There are many things in this world you can't achieve without gaining victory."

"You are rushing too much."

"You will not believe me no matter what I do."

Altina gave a lonely smile.

Regis was dumbstruck.

-- Should he believe that Altina will win even if he had no other comrades?

"You will lose something irreplaceable if you make the wrong call when driven by emotions. I can't keep failing in the same place."

Regis remembers Marquis Thénezay.

He will probably never forget that he did not propose a 3rd time. Or not noticing the pride of the nobles.

It is meaningless to have knowledge alone.

This fact had been engraved into his heart.

"Are you going to stop me? Could it be you are planning to escape with me? That would be very romantic."

"I can't do that. I thought about it before, but you are powerful enough for Jerome to be on his guard. Running away with you without raising a commotion is impossible. And if you are someone who will run away, you would have stopped this duel already."

"You are right. It's regrettable that it is not romantic at all."

"Although I have thought about what to do if you lose..."

Altina frowned.

"And that would be?"

"I will stall Jerome; you will escape with a certain knight away from the fortress in the meantime. But I can't tell you who that knight is..."

Regis was prepared for Altina to be angry for making plans to run if she was defeated.

But Altina laugh unexpectedly.

She is holding her stomach laughing out loud.

"No, no good... Ahahaha... Re, Regis you are really too much!! Ahahaha! You thought I will definitely lose! Hah~ the laughing ends here okay!?"

"I felt bad for doing this to you. But my private relations with you and objective judgment are two different matters. I have to make adequate preparation for the worst case scenario..."

"Ahahaha, that's right! I think you are necessary for me because you are this sort of person. This is the calm judgment as a strategist."

"Not the judgment of a strategist. This is... that... How should I put

it?"

It will be too much responsibility for a 5th grade admin officer.

So as Altina's friend?

When did he become friend with Altina who was the commander? Thinking he was a friend because he was allowed to address her by her nickname was too foolish.

Regis was troubled and became quiet.

Altina was laughing so hard her shoulders were trembling.

Sound of panting was mixed into Altina's laughter.

"Ha, ha... I thought I will die from laughing before the duel. I didn't think you had made preparation to run after losing... Ah... This is too much."

"I won't find any excuse. I don't believe you will win."

Regis confessed once again.

Altina wasn't angry and just nodded.

"I know. There is only one person who believes in my victory unconditionally."

"You mean Clarisse..."

"Yeah. But to reach my goal, a person who doesn’t trust me that much is necessary too."

"Is that person referring to me?"

"I confirmed that it is you after this incident. In order to gain your trust, I will not lose this duel."

Altina challenged Jerome to win the trust of the troops in this regiment.

Including Regis.

"... Can this duel be cancelled because of my attitude?"

"Hmmm~~, maybe?"

"Ugh..."

His mental fatigue increased by 30%.

Altina reaches over with her hand.

Her hand touched Regis' left chest, right above the heart.

"Hmmm?"

"I want to become an empress...If my wish doesn't come true, I will definitely die. The strategist will also follow."

No matter what measures they took, Altina would surely not be the only one who had to take responsibility.

His heart under Altina's palm started to race.

Altina wasn't finished.

"Holding expectation for you as a strategist, means expecting you to even risk your life."

"That's right..."

Regis understood this.

That's why Regis was hesitant.

"Since I am asking you to risk your life, it is normal for me to risk mine too. I don't want to be a dumb queen who expects loyalty just by sitting on the throne."

Altina slid her hand up from Regis' chest to his neck, and then his face.

Her hand feels cool.

"Watch with your eyes, I will prove my will to you... And you can consider about the issue on that night."

"The portion which I can't believe in myself, you will believe in it in my stead. So I have to trust you, right?"

Altina nodded and retract her hand.

And she reached for the colossal sword leaning on the wall.

She gripped the hilt tightly.

"It's about time."

Altina and Jerome stood opposite to each other in the center of the wall of soldiers.

They were about 10 paces apart.

Underneath the feet of everyone was snow.

Visibility was poor and everything was white. This was a blizzard.

Altina was wearing arm guard and knee guard over her dress.

In her hand was the Grand Tonerre Quatre.

That was a giant sword that didn't match the petite girl.

Jerome on the other side didn't wear any armor, just a normal attire of black shirt with military pants. He was holding a short spear used by foot soldiers in the forest. It was about 27Pa (2m) long, about the length of the giant sword.

Regis stood among the wall of people surrounding them. Evrard dressed in full armor walked to his side and said:

"Both sides are calm."

"That's true... How is the preparation?"

"No problem, Miss Clarisse is waiting at the carriage."

"Thank you."

Their talk about the plan after the duel stopped.

Evrard stroked his beard.

"The Margrave had given that up. He did not use a sword to gain advantage in speed, or a long lance to get better range. He chose a weapon that didn't give him any edge."

"I don't understand anything about the clashes between swords and lance... But the short spear used by the Margrave puts him at a disadvantage?"

"That thing is not light or long, and will break with a strike from the giant sword."

"He wouldn't use this... as an excuse for losing?"

"That was prepared by him in advance; it can't be used as an excuse. He meant to use it the other way."

"To prevent the princess from finding excuses?"

"Yes! Just like the princess not giving the Margrave any grounds for excuses by raising all sorts of terms and setting the duel 3 days later. The Margrave is using a weapon that is disadvantageous to him to silent any complaints from the princess -- They are starting."

"...!!"

The noon bell rang as if it were announcing the start of the fight.

The screech of metal on metal raged from the parade square.

Most people thought it will be the young princess slashing at the Margrave while he dodges.

"Ora ora ora!!"

But the one roaring and striking first was Jerome.

Jerome kicked away the snow under his feet and charged over.

Altina didn't move. Or she couldn't move?

Margrave closed the 10 pace gap in an instant and thrust his spear.

"Hah!"

Will it be settled on the first move--!! The soldiers were stunned.

"This sort of attack!!"

Altina breathed out.

And used the body of the sword to block the tip of the spear.

Jerome groaned.

The two piece of metal collide with a screech.

The short spear stabbing at the girl's shoulder was deflected.

Jerome sighed.

"Ugh... A normal spear can't even scratch it!"

"Made from 'Elf silver'?"

Regis said softly.

During the wars that founded the empire, there were legends that the powerful swords were made from silver and were granted to the flame emperor.

The swords were probably made from natural metal, an alloy -- researchers explained it as such. In this era, material stronger than steel can be made by smelting a few types of metal together, and was common knowledge.

But an alloy that can rival Elf silver had not been discovered yet, so some people believed the sword had the blessing of the Elves.

The giant sword became the shield protecting the petite Altina.

After his strike was warded off, Jerome pulled back his spear to steady himself. The feet of the girl already kicked out before that.

A dull thud reverberated in the parade square.

"Ugh..."

A powerful kick landed on Jerome's knee.

The posture of the burly man broke.

The girl yelled:

"Fight seriously, Jerome!"

"Woah!?"

The sword didn't touch the ground when it was swung, but the snow was scattered by it. The power of the sword was strong enough for the soldiers surrounding them to feel it.

Jerome rolled on the ground to evade this disaster level strike.

His body and spear would probably be crushed if he blocks the blow.

The troops watching the fight were fired up because of this unexpectedly opening.

The princess' sword forces the Margrave to roll on the floor, staining his clothes with snow and mud to dodge it. No one expected that.

"... Maybe, she can win?"

But the faint words of hope that came out from Regis' chest were pushed back by Evrard.

"This is just the beginning!"

Jerome is still smiling as he took a stance.

"Too naive, little girl. You will regret not finishing me off with that blow just now."

"My objective is to show that I am stronger than you, not to tear my subordinate's body to shreds."

"Do you have the room to hold back?"

"You were aiming for my shoulder too. Are you worried that you can't marry me if I am dead?"

"Kukuku... That did cross my mind."

"Fight with all your might!"

"Fu, interesting!"

The two of them went at each other.

Jerome attacked repeatedly, Altina blocked with her sword.

Altina wielding that gigantic lump of metal with her thin arm like a tree branch seems so unrealistic like a B movie.

Altina slashing repeatedly while Jerome parried became more frequent.

Jerome is being cornered!?

The shouts came from the soldiers.

Evrard's hands are trembling.

"Oh... Too think the princess was this strong... She is a goddess!"

"Can she win?"

"Ugh!! Erm... the Margrave is hesitant in his thrusting attack. He is worried about killing the princess. The important point is the Margrave needing to release his strength when the sword blocks his attack, or else the spear will break. In contrast, the Margrave needs to parry and deflect the attack from the sword."

"Because the spear will break if he blocks directly?"

"That's right; the Margrave is protecting his spear in both attack and defense, so the princess has the upper hand."

"So why can't she win?"

"It's a pity the princess is not a man."

"Eh? That..."

As they watched, the situation of Jerome attacking while Altina defends increases.

Jerome still has energy to spare. He twirls his spear from time to time to show he was taking it easy.

On the other hand, Altina was out of breath.

She lacks stamina.

She might have the strength to swing the colossal sword, but she can't match the hero Jerome who was burly in built for an extended battle.

The giant blade became sluggish; it can't keep up with the speed of the short spear.

A part of her dress was torn by the tip of the spear.

Jerome was still fighting a dangerous battle where his weapon will break with one wrong move, like walking on a thin rope. But the scene was slowly evolving into Jerome cornering Altina with his attacks.

The shoulder of her one piece dress was pierced, Altina's shoulder was bared.

Blood oozed from her white skin.

"Hah... hah..."

"You are quite good; I thought you will run out of stamina earlier, little girl."

"I won't surrender because my breathing is slightly fast."

"Hmmp, I will acknowledge you then. There are not many people in this fortress who can fight me to this extend. And you are still young. You will probably be a great swordsman in 3 years."

"Hah, hah... acknowledge me as a swordsman? Is your brain clamped by the door? What I want is to be acknowledged as your commander."

"The soldiers will be more willing to listen to your orders if you are this strong. You are not at my level yet, but you are good enough to be a vice commander."

"Is that so... then... I can't give up now!"

Altina lifted her sword.

She plowed through the snow and charged.

And swung it down.

"Hyaaa!!"

"Ara ara... Being too greedy will be the end of you."

The sword shatters the ground.

A screen of snow rises from the ground.

A loud bang erupts like thunder.

Jerome evaded the strike and thrust with his spear.

"Hah!"

"Hee...., Hya!"

Altina lift the sword that sank into the ground.

She aimed at the spear thrust towards her.

Right before the sword was about to smash the spear, Jerome pulled his body and weapon back and retreated.

It was an empty swing.

He saw through her intention.

The blow that used all her strength was evaded, Altina's footing grew unsteady.

Jerome didn't miss this opening and swung his spear at Altina.

Unable to evade, the short spear hit Altina's left arm and blew her away.

"Ugu!?"

The armor on the girl's arm shattered.

Regis leans forward.

"Altina!?"

He can't help shouting.

The girl rolled on the snowy ground wildly. The match is set -- Everyone present thought. But Altina's hand didn't let go of the hilt.

And she stood up immediately.

"Hah... hah... hah... hah... hah..."

Altina's flaming eyes glared at her opponent.

Blood was gushing out of her left arm, dying the armor and the sleeve of her dress red.

Her left arm hung limply.

It was probably fractured or numbed from pain.

Only her right hand was holding the sword.

It was clear that Altina can't continue the fight. But she didn't look like she was giving up.

Jerome pulled away and sank his spear into the ground, relaxing his stance. He maintained alert and asked:

"Do you still want to carry on?"

"Definitely... hah... haha... I will never give up..."

"You have only one arm left?"

"You... ugu... just losing an arm on the battlefield... hah... Would you have given up?"

"Hmmp, your spirit is commendable. But what do you plan to do after becoming the commander? Little girl, can you shoulder the lives of the 3000 men in the border regiment?"

"Hah... hah... You think I challenged you without this level of resolve... Ugu... Are you looking down on me? I will even shoulder this entire nation, just watch me!"

Altina lift the colossal blade with just her right hand.

It is not just Regis who was reminded of the legendary man who wield thundering sword quartet single handed by Altina's posture.

The soldiers became rowdy.

But Jerome didn't put up a stance with his short spear.

He asked as strongly as the thrust from his spear --

"You think... an amateur like you is more suitable for command than me? These are not problems you can settle with just your resolve. I am asking if you have the relevant skills! One mistake and thousands of troops will die in vain. Do you understand!?"

"...Tch!?"

Even though the pain and fatigue was beyond the limit of her body, Altina was still mentally alert. But she was stumped by this question!

There were doubts in the crimson eyes of the girl.

Her eyes wandered through the crowd and focused on one point.

Jerome followed Altina's gaze.

The soldiers watching the duel did the same. Countless pairs of eyes fell on him. Even Edward standing beside him did the same.

Regis felt as if he was being crushed by the immense pressure.

He can feel the weight of everyone's gaze.

The noise in the surrounding fades far away.

Regis placed his hand over his heart.

He can only hear his heart beating disturbingly loud.

Why, did it turn out like this?

Why.

(-- Was it that night? When Altina said she believes in me, and I didn't turn her away. That was it! That was why she was working so hard for such a useless person like me!

I don't know about such a situation.

I don't get it.

I had never read about this before.

See, I can't do anything right.

Even breathing is hard.

I am going to faint.)

Regis looked at Altina in a daze.

Her lips were moving.

It was noisy so he can't hear her, but the movement of her lips reflected clearly in his eyes.

I. Believe. In. You.

Ah, really--

"Can't be helped, she is the princess, but really..."

Regis took a step forward.

The snow underneath his feet made a sound.

"... This is not 'believing'. You are just not thinking, or being unreasonable, bearing hope without any basis. Impractical reasons dictating others to challenge things beyond their limits, resulting in tragedy. Examples like this are scattered throughout the river of history."

There are cases of forcing unreasonable ideals onto others in the long flow of history. They took on challenges that do not match their talents because of these ideals, producing many tragic stories.

With sighs mixed in together with groans, he said as if he was forcing the words out of his mouth.

“This is so depressing… I have to take on challenges that don’t match me too. I feel like crying over my foolishness.”

Regis steps out of the encirclement of soldiers alone.

He went to Altina’s side.

Altina smiled and replies with a hoarse voice.

“Thank you, Regis.”

“… It’s too early for that.”

Jerome released his killing intent and asked in a voice so low it seemed to come from beneath the earth:

"What are you doing in here? You are just a complementary apple rolling in a corner!"

"My apologies, I might be a small fry to you Margrave, but someone doesn't think so... Let's make a promise, I will help you. If the princess wins this fight, I Regis Auric will become your strategist!"

--Strategist!?

Sounds of surprise spread among the soldiers.

After Regis' capability was confirmed by the bandit incident, no one treated him like a useless person any more.

Some might think the rank of 5th grade admin officer was too low, but that was the minority. The one with the highest rank was the princess after all.

Jerome points his spear at Regis.

"Can you do it? You don't have the will, courage or even spirit."

"... That's right, I don't even believe in myself. I have no confidence. But even so, there is someone who believes in me. As long as she continues to believe in me, I will give it a shot."

Regis wasn't dense enough to reject this position with some excuses after making such a bold declaration.

He didn't have any ulterior motives driving him to aid Altina. But he really wants to help her from the bottom of his heart.

"... I will take up this role. More importantly, Sir Jerome, you promised to yield to the princess and work under her if she wins. So

her actual command authority rising won't affect the command structure of the regiment."

"Hmmp, still throwing big words around like usual. I know what you want to say so back off, the fight is still on."

Regis slowly returns to the crowd.

Jerome took a stance with his short spear.

"Rest time is over, little girl."

"What are you implying? I didn't intend to stall for time to rest. You are the one who had things to talk about, saying this and that about the command."

"Right, this development was beyond my expectations... Personally, I would prefer resolving this peacefully... But this mindset stops now. You have the will, resolve as well as a strategist, little girl; I will acknowledge that you have the potential to be a commander. But I can't lose either!"

"From the very beginning, what I want to show is not my will or resolve... but my strength!"

Both of them shout.

The pressure from them made the air tremble.

Altina's arm hung weakly even after a short rest.

She uses her right arm to swing her sword, making the first move.

"Hyaaa!"

The sword slashed down with enough power to cut through anything, and changed from a downward cut to a horizontal slice. The sword slashed towards Jerome's waist.

A blow that is difficult to block or avoid.

Jerome nodded.

"That's right; this is your only attack option. You don't have much stamina left to wield your sword agilely."

The slash threatened to cut the Margrave in half.

But Jerome displayed his exceptional leaping powers -- jumping up to evade the slash.

If he bends downwards to dodge, Altina might be able to use the weight of the sword to attack downwards.

But it was hard to follow with an upwards attack using that heavy weapon.

To pull her sword back after that missed attack, Altina turns around, her defenseless back exposed to her opponent.

The match was set -- Most of the people probably thought so.

Not just the troops, even Jerome was no exception.

He just needs to thrust his spear onto Altina's neck to end the duel. When they were thinking about that, something unexpected happened...

Altina didn't stop after turning around.

"Ahhhh!!"

"What!?"

After missing the initial attack, the sword swung one round and slashes towards Jerome once again.

And it was faster than before.

Speeding up after accelerating from the momentum, it closes in on Jerome's flank.

Jerome grits his teeth.

"Tch!!"

He intercept with his short spear at an angle, attempting to parry the blow.

A loud sound of clashing metal that wasn't heard in the parade square until now erupted.

The sword slides along the short spear and was deflected away from Jerome.

Altina's right arm cracks.

It was slightly deformed from over exertion.

"Shatter ah!!!!!"

The colossal sword did not smash the spear.

It slid off.

After the very clear sound of impact, the tip of the spear shattered and fell off.

Even so, the body of the spear can still be used as a weapon.

Altina lost her balance and fell onto the ground.

Her face was downwards.

The snow on the ground scattered away.

Jerome lifts the spear without its tip with both hands.

He just needs to swing it down and stop before it hits the girl's head. That's all it will take. There was no need to knock on the girl lying prone on the ground.

The soldiers gulped as they watch.

At this very moment --

The short spear raised in the air broke in two like a twig.

"Wha...?"

Can't say anything.

Not just Jerome, everyone who saw this scene lost their voice.

In Jerome's hands are 2 sticks the length of a short sword. It can still be used to fight even in this state.

But the spear was broken.

Altina still lay prone in the snow.

"Fu... fu.... ugu..."

She was trying to stand up, but she can't move her left arm and her right arm doesn't have the strength to prop herself up.

Her legs and shoulders are trembling; she can't continue to grip the heavy sword.

The soldiers watched without blinking their eyes.

Jerome threw the broken spear away.

"Fu... Having your weapon break in a duel. The most miserable way to lose."

The soldiers became rowdy when Jerome admitted his lost.

The general lost?

The princess won?"

Does Altina who was lying in the snow understand the situation?

Evrard asked Jerome to confirm.

"Sir Jerome... this is the princess' victory."

"Annoying."

The knight commander lowered his head at the Margrave's words.

The troops around the 2 combatants shouted and groaned at the unexpected ending. There are also some cheers.

The noise shook the entire fortress.

Regis rushed to Altina's side.

"Princess, you have won. Please stand up... Now is the critical time."

"Ugugu..."

Altina nodded.

She had expended energy beyond her limits.

Her left shoulder was still bleeding.

Even so, the duel will be meaningless if she was to falter now.

Altina propped herself up.

"Hah... Hah... that's right... Jerome who lost is still standing... Ugu... I, the victor lying on the floor... will be a laughingstock."

"..."

Regis nodded silently.

He felt his chest heating up because of Altina's strong will and effort.

He wasn't too long in deciding to believe in her. Expressing his feelings at the climax of the duel wasn't wrong either. Just trust this girl.

Continue believing in her.

Regis wiped the corner of his eyes that is warming up.

Altina stood up. She stretched her thin and white fingers towards the sky.

This is a quiet and beautiful announcement of victory.

The noise in the surrounding went wild.

In this intense eruption of noise, Altina spoke with Regis who was standing beside her.

"Hey..."

"Hmmm?"

Altina grabs Regis' shoulder with her shaking right hand.

"How about that? Are you willing to trust me now?"

Regis nodded.

He doesn’t need to consider it anymore.

"... Yes, I will believe you. I promise."

"Yeah, it's a promise."

Altina was all smiles.

Her expression was like a bright day in the spring.

The crowds' adrenaline rush still kept them high, it was like an endless festival on the parade square.

The chaos felt like it will go on forever.

Suddenly, the bell was ringed.

There was nothing mysterious about it.

From the highest watch tower in the fortress --

The bell situated up there was ringed nonstop.

The soldiers were stunned, unable to comprehend what was happening for that moment.

The parade square quieted down, and the sound coming from the watch tower became clear.

"Enemy attack~~~!! We are under attack~~~!! Coming from the north, it's the barbarians--!!"

The savages were attacking under the cover of the blizzard.

Uneasiness was spreading among the troops.

They looked to Jerome immediately.

Regis shouts:

"Margrave!"

This is the moment to change the relationships between the two of them. If they don't show the change in their position now, Altina's duel at the risk of her life would be a waste.

"... Don't worry... I know."

Jerome walked to Altina's front.

He knelt on one knee in the snow.

"Princess, the enemy is upon us! Please give the orders!"

The soldiers watch this scene in surprise...

And they imitated Jerome and knelt.

Like a ripple on the water surface, the troops knelt with Altina at the center and lowered their heads.

The soldiers expressed their change in thinking.

The resolve of the young girl bore fruit.

Evrard was among those who knelt. He was smiling with satisfaction.

Altina who was the center of attention was exhausted and her legs were shaking. She continued to grab Regis' shoulders because she will fall if she lets go.

Regis whispered in Altina's ears.

Altina nods and issued orders as proposed by Regis:

"I order Sir Jerome to lead 100 cavalry to intercept the enemy. Find out the number of enemy forces and form a battle front if possible... If the enemy force is too large, you are to withdraw with the safety of our forces as the priority!"

"Orders received!!"

The general stood after nodding.

"All of you, the orders for the vanguards are out, prepare the horses! And get me my lance! I will wring your necks if you take your time!"

The soldiers moved as command after Jerome finished.

-- It worked.

The princess had displayed her new position publicly.

Regis supports the back of the faltering Altina with his hand.

"Come on, just a bit longer... can you make it to the central tower?"

"Of, of course..."

They have to avoid the loser of the duel Jerome leading the attack while the victorious princess being carried out in a stretcher.

This is the time to show her indomitable will.

Evrard rushed over.

"Shall I bring the princess to the infirmary?"

"It will be disgraceful to visit the infirmary now... we will bring her to her quarters using a change of clothes as an excuse. Please summon the doctor over and treat her injuries there."

"I get it now."

"Ah, if we don't bring the sword..."

"I will get my boys to settle it."

"Thank you -- the enemy is attacking under the cover of the blizzard, so their numbers should be limited. We responded swiftly as well, we can chase them back with the vanguards if things go well..."

"What should I do?"

"Mr. Edward, please make preparation as the 2nd wave. Standby with 200 cavalries."

"Standby? We are not attacking after getting ready?"

"The front lines are still fluid. The vanguard might be forced to retreat, or it could turn into a chaotic battle... Please attack after understanding the situation. Otherwise, the vanguard will be confused."

"I understand, leave this to me!"

Evrard gathered the knights.

There was a need to organize the foot soldiers into a 3rd wave too. As for the defense of the fortress, there was no need to issue any new orders.

To be frank, he wanted to consult Jerome who was familiar with the operation of this regiment. But in order to display the new relationship between Jerome and the princess, he had to forcefully dispatch Jerome out in the first wave.

His judgment was strongly influenced by politics this time.

The best tactical decision was to stay and defend the fortress. After grasping the enemy's situation, well prepared units can then be

dispatched.

Textbook examples and chess strategies cannot be used blindly in an actual battle.

Jerome's vanguard charged out of the main gate.

The troops with weapons in hands rushed to their stations.

The knights instructed to carry the colossal sword entered the central tower quickly.

Only the heavily wounded Altina and Regis who was supporting her were walking slowly.

Altina said in a slur:

"I am fine... so... please focus on the regiment, Regis..."

Her face looked terrible because of fatigue, the cold and the loss of blood.

Regis squeezed out a confident smile.

To put Altina at ease, he exaggerated:

"No problem, Altina. I know plenty about things of this level. Just leave it to me."

"... You looked rather dependable."

"Of course."

"Not like you at all."

"Ah, errr..."

She saw through him easily.

Regis doesn't seemed to have the talent for acting.

Whatever, Regis thought.

"Well, I wished there was time to understand our forces. And to send them out after grasping the scale of the barbarian's attack... And dispatching Sir Jerome's unit out before the troops on top of the main gate fired any arrows at the enemy wasn't too bad either. I feel that we should be able to fend off the enemy's sneak attack. It will work out somehow... Probably."

"I see, that's great."

"Enough about that, are you doing ok?"

"I'm good. I'm really fine... Hey Regis..."

"Yeah?"

"Thank you, when I was questioned during the duel... you expressed your willingness to accept the appointment as strategist... It made me really happy."

"I should be thanking you. I always wanted to tell you... Altina, thank you for believing in me."

The main gate opened with a heavy sound.

The horns signaling the advance of the 2nd wave sounded, the soldiers roared.

Regis and Altina watched the soldiers charge onto the battlefield.

覇剣の皇姫アルティーナの世界

通貨 currency

帝国歴八五十年のベルガリア帝国では、リーブル金貨、ソル銀貨、ドゥニエ銅貨の三種類の貨幣が流通していた。紙幣は存在しない。

リーブル金貨とドゥニエ銅貨は、現在の日本で流通する十円玉と同じくらいの大きさで、ソル銀貨は五百円玉くらいの大きさであった。

価値は、一リーブル＝二〇ソル＝二四〇ドゥニエと決められていたが、混乱する時期もあった。

六十年前、占領した地から大量に銀が取れたため、銀の価値が暴落。深刻な貨幣危機に陥った。商務省は相場安定化のため、ソル銀貨の流通量を制限している。

機械による造幣は、その直後から行われている。銀貨の制限により、銅貨の製造が手作りでは追いつかなくなったため導入された。

当初は失敗品も多かったが、この時代には重さも形も均一な精度の高い硬貨が作られている。

物価は、一ドゥニエで、リンゴが一カゴ（三〜四個）、卵が一個が買える。パンなら一日ぶん。ビールなら一杯。平民の一週間の生活費は五〇ドゥニエほど。

労働者の週給は一〇〇ドゥニエなので、贅沢をしなければ貯金することもできた。

ちなみに、レジス五等文官の週給は二〇〇ドゥニエで意外と高給取りだが、彼の愛好する書籍は、帝都で二〇ドゥニエ。辺境では二〇〇ドゥニエもする。

帝国には社会保障も保険もないため、ケガや病気や結婚に備えて、たいていの者は預金をしていた。

また、給料を故郷へ送金する者もいた。

そうした銀行の役割を担っているのは教会である。

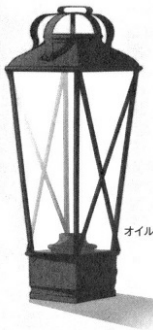
戦地だろうが田舎だろうが国中にあり、給与を預けられるほど信用でき、貴族の横暴に対抗できる力を持った組織は、この時代には教会しかなかった。

照明 lighting

この時代のベルガリア帝国では、四種類の照明が使われていた。

最も優れているのはガス灯で、明るく、安定して、煤も少ない。ただし、ガス燃料は扱いが難しく、帝都の一部でしか見られなかった。たとえば宮廷の広間など。

次に優れているのがオイルランプで、帝国内では最も普及している。瓶に入った灯油に芯がひたしてあるというシンプルな構造で、屋内の照明だけでなく、歩行者の持つカンテラや、馬車の前照灯にも幅広く利用された。


オイルランプ

蝋燭は暗く、火が揺れやすく、煤が多い。

しかし、オイルランプの燃料となる灯油は産地が限られ、輸送にリスクが伴うため、地方都市では蝋燭が一般的であった。

ベルガリア帝国で使われているのは、蜜蝋である。ミツバチの巣を形作っている蝋が原料で、蜂の巣を茹でて溶かして、不純物を取り除いて作られる。

普及品は不純物の残留が多く、たいてい黄土色であった。

不純物のない白い蝋は高級品であり、手紙の封や、調度品の素材や、化粧品として用いられる。また、教会の儀式では白蝋燭として使われた。

戦場では、油にひたした小枝や藁を束ねた松明が使用された。

明るくて、火が消えにくく、落としても壊れないといった利点がある。

反面、とうてい屋内では使えないほど煤が出ようえ、火の粉が飛ぶので火災の危険もある。

灯火の着火には火口箱が使われた。

これらの灯火を使うことができたのは、平均以上の家庭であり、使用人や貧困層は、月明かり以上の照明を持たなかった。

まだ電気は科学者たちの研究対象であり、発電機は実用段階にない。電灯の登場は百年以上も先である。

儀式用の蝋燭

Credits

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